

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

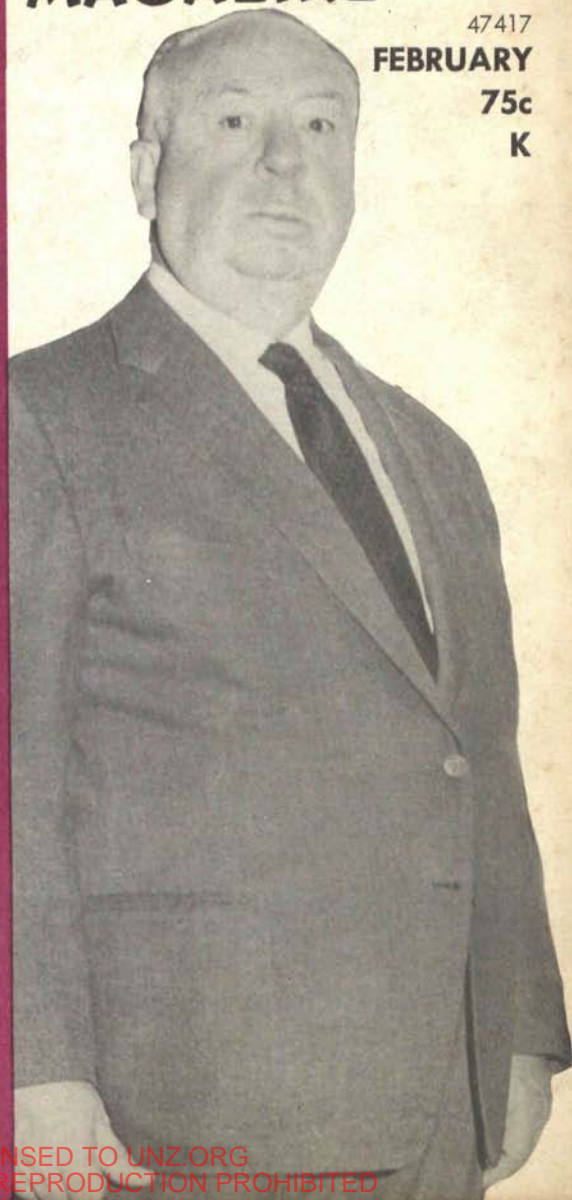
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW stories
presented by
the master
of **SUSPENSE**

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February 1973

Dear Reader:

A new year is under way, but unlike the calendar, some things never change. Though their motives may differ, murderers are still incorrigible; but who would have it otherwise?

Cases stamped *Unsolved* are, however, simply nonexistent in these pages. Lives end as surely as has 1972, but perceptive detectives of varied calling are always on hand to deliver full credit to the proper offender.

Those of whom you will read this month are aided, for instance, by Stephen Wasylyk, who writes of a *Funeral in a Small Town*, and by novelettist George C. Chesbro, who conducts experiments in *Rage*, with an intervening, nonpareil group of their outstanding colleagues who pen more of the best in new mystery and suspense.

Good reading.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Dismaying it is, indeed, for one to discover that long-nourished dreams frequently materialize as defunct entities.

Fox River Tribune

FUNERAL IN A SMALL TOWN

by
Stephen Wasylyk

Barrett drove grimly, the speedometer needle well above sixty-five until he left the turnpike and headed east on the Fox River Road, a twisting, turning blacktop through the mountains that still held patches of ice and snow where the tall pines had blocked out the sun.

There was no sun this morning. The sky was gray and low, like the mood that had settled on Barrett when the phone had rung in the cool darkness of his bedroom long before dawn.

"Page," his Aunt Edna had said softly, "you'll have to come up here. Lou is dead."

The question stuck in Barrett's throat. "How?"

He sensed from the silence that his aunt didn't want to put it into words, as if not saying it would make it not true. "Killed," she said finally. "Someone went into the

newspaper office last night and shot him."

Barrett let the words sink in, not wanting to believe them any more than she did.

"I'll be there," he said. "As fast as I can make it."

He flicked on the lamp between the twin beds, to be confronted by the annoyance in his wife's eyes as she blinked away the sudden brilliance. Phone calls at odd hours were nothing new for Barrett, but Deb had never become used to or accepted them. It was only one of the points of friction between them lately. It wasn't the major one.

For months, his aunt and uncle had been asking him to come back to the small town in the mountains where he had been born, where his uncle was the editor and publisher of the small weekly newspaper, so that his uncle could retire and turn the paper over to Barrett. Barrett, feeling hemmed in by the city and wanting to turn back the pages of his life to what he knew was a more free, unhurried existence, was in favor of the move but his wife had announced firmly she had no intention of living in a small town.

His wife brushed back her long blonde hair. "Another crisis at the agency?"

"Far more serious," Barrett said. "Lou was killed last night."

She swung out of bed and into a

robe in one fluid motion, a graceful woman almost as tall as Barrett, with a slim, well-proportioned body that never failed to stir him, even now. She accepted the announcement without shock or curiosity, which didn't surprise Barrett. As long as his uncle was alive, the decision to move or not to move could be postponed indefinitely. Now that he was dead, the decision would have to be made soon, and that was uppermost in her mind. "I assume you are going up there?"

He nodded. "You'll come with me, of course."

"No," she said. "He was your uncle, not mine."

Barrett felt a familiar touch of frustration and anger. There were times when he didn't understand her, couldn't understand her. "It would only be common courtesy."

"No," she said again. "I won't go. I have always felt out of place there." There was an inflection in her voice that said if he wanted to argue, she was prepared.

Not this time, Page Barrett thought wearily. *There are more important things to do*. He dialed Elmdorf, who headed the advertising agency where Barrett was a well-paid account executive, and explained the situation to him.

"Take as much time as you like," Elmdorf had said. "We'll talk when you get back."

Barrett knew what he meant. Elmdorf was aware of his uncle's offer and sided with Barrett's wife in thinking he should turn it down. His reasons were as self-centered as hers. Barrett controlled a large amount of business that the agency would probably lose if he left.

A patch of ice forced Barrett's thoughts to the immediate present. The car started to skid and Barrett twisted the wheel sharply and then he was back on the roadway, topping a small rise, a snow-covered valley spread before him. The Fox River bisected the whiteness like a piece of dark blue, twisted yarn, making a slight bend below, where a bridge took the road across and into a small town.

Barrett slowed. He always enjoyed this particular moment, summer or winter, when the valley unfolded suddenly and his long trip was almost ended.

A bright red VW, skis strapped to its rear deck, horn raucous, flashed by and cut back too quickly, forcing Barrett off the road and into the snow, inches away from the guard barrier and the long steep slope to the river. Barrett fought the car back onto the road and stopped. He took a deep breath. If he had been going just a little faster . . .

He looked down the slope. Except for a few scattered trees, there

was nothing to have kept him from tumbling into the river.

He curbed an impulse to take out after the VW, but the little car was already halfway to the bridge, a small red speck speeding down the curving roadway. If it belongs around here, we'll meet again, Barrett reflected grimly as he set the car in motion.

Fox River looked no different than usual when he drove through, and Barrett was conscious of a slight surprise. He didn't know exactly what he had expected from the town because his uncle had been killed, but business as usual wasn't part of it, not with his uncle's position in the community.

Lou Beck and his newspaper had been the guiding light and the conscience of Fox River and the surrounding county for almost forty years, ever since he woke one morning tired of the push and the odor of the big city and the pressure of working for a metropolitan daily. Within a week he and Edna Beck had been headed for his home town, his bank savings in his pocket after a phone call had confirmed the weekly was for sale.

He had grown old there, surrounded by the dusty, dry smell of the newspaper office, of printing ink and hot lead, of the oil-soaked old press in the back room. He had made Barrett his reporter at six-

teen, during high school summer vacation, hammering at his copy until Barrett knew what he meant when he said, "Write the facts, boy, and keep it short. Opinions are for the editorial page and I write that. You stay at it long enough and I'll make you a good newspaperman."

Barrett smiled, remembering his uncle's disapproval when he had gone into advertising. His opinion had been expressed in one healthy snort of disgust and he thereafter referred to Barrett's work only as "That job of yours."

Barrett swung the car into his aunt's driveway. Waiting and watching for him, she opened the door, her silver hair neatly set, her small figure erect and already dressed in black, her arms outstretched, and Barrett had the feeling he had come home after a long absence.

Sometime later, he curled his fingers around a cup of coffee in the warm kitchen, examining the fine porcelain as if he were seeing it for the first time, wondering how to ask the questions that had to be asked. He sipped the coffee. "Tell me about it."

"I have very little to tell. Lou came home last night for dinner, took a short nap and went back to the office. You know he always worked late the night before they started printing the paper. He was

usually home by ten. At eleven, I called the office but there was no answer. I became worried, so I called Grant Rhodes and asked him to look into it."

Barrett nodded. Grant Rhodes was the chief of the three-man police force, and he and Lou had been friends for years.

"About an hour later, Grant came to the door. I knew something was wrong but I never dreamed of anything like this. Grant said it looked like someone had just walked up behind Lou and shot him. Why, Page? Why should anyone shoot him?"

Barrett avoided the tear-filled eyes. "I don't know. All we can do now is try to find out. I'll go speak to Grant."

He slipped into his coat, knowing she hadn't asked yet why his wife wasn't with him, dreading the question because there was really no answer. She watched him affectionately, reaching out to turn up his coat collar. Barrett smiled. She had done that often when he was a boy, when he had come to live with them after his parents had died.

"Deb won't be coming?" she asked suddenly.

Embarrassed, Barrett shook his head.

"Well," said his aunt, "I suppose she has her reasons."

"You should have someone to

stay with you," Barrett suggested.

"I do. Cindy Neal. You probably don't remember her. She was a little girl when you went off to college. She teaches English now at the high school and helped Lou at the paper with the women's pages. She's down at the office with Tom Cottrell."

Cottrell had been his uncle's combination typesetter, makeup man and pressman, had been with the paper since the day Lou had bought it, and Barrett wondered what he would do now that the old man was dead.

"I'll stop by and see them," said Barrett.

He decided to walk. The town wasn't that big and, while it was cold, it wasn't the bitter dampness winter brought to the city. He found Grant Rhodes in his office, a thin man in a tan uniform, with a hook nose, skin that had the patina of well-cared-for leather, and a mouth bracketed by deep creases.

Rhodes motioned him to a chair. "I was expecting you, Page."

"Anything to tell me?"

"We are investigating, but we have very little to go on. Your uncle was alone in the office, sitting at his desk. Someone came up behind him and shot him in the back of the head with a small-caliber gun. There must be hundreds of those in the county, so we have nothing

there. It had to be between nine, when Cottrell left as usual, and eleven, when I found him."

"Robbery?"

"In a town where people don't even lock their doors? His wallet was in his pocket. Nothing was missing from the office. Nothing there worth stealing, really."

"No motive at all?"

"None that is apparent. I can't think of one person who would want to kill Lou. To tell you the truth, Page, I'm a little out of my depth with this one, just as I was with the other."

Barrett sat a little straighter. "The other?"

"You wouldn't have heard about it in the city, but one of the local kids, a sixteen-year-old girl, was found raped and strangled in the woods about a week ago. The poor kid had been on the way home from school when someone caught her." He shook his head. "There is nothing yet on that one either. Just some tracks in the snow that mean nothing. No one saw or heard anything." He sighed. "Peaceful county like this goes on for years with no trouble, then two killings within a week."

"Maybe there is a connection."

"The kind of man who would attack a young girl is not the same who would shoot an old man. At least, in my opinion."

Barrett nodded and rose. "I'll go over to the office and look around. Maybe I can find something that will help."

"If you need me, I'll be here." Rhodes pulled a long black cigar from his pocket and lit it, eyeing Barrett through the smoke. "I suppose you'll be taking over the paper now?"

Barrett shrugged and walked out. He had forgotten there were no personal affairs in this town:

He came across the red VW at the curb in front of the drugstore across the street from the newspaper office, the skis still in the rack. Lips tight, he walked around the car. Dents in the right side showed that his hadn't been the only car forced off the road.

Barrett entered the drugstore, eyes searching. Several young men and women dressed in ski clothes were seated at the soda fountain, others occupying the booths. It was impossible to tell which was the driver of the VW.

Behind the prescription counter at the rear of the store, a short, heavyset man with a bald head smiled and beckoned. He held out his hand as Barrett approached. "Glad to see you back, Page. Sorry about Lou, but still good to see you again."

A widower, Allen Carey had been the town pharmacist for al-

most as long as Lou had owned the paper, and he was a good one. He filled prescriptions cheerfully, even in the small hours of the morning, and did a little emergency *sub rosa* prescribing on his own.

Barrett jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I don't suppose you know who owns the red VW with the ski rack that's parked out front?"

"I certainly do. It belongs to my boy Pete. He's a real ski nut. Spends almost all his time over at the ski resort on Big Bear Mountain." He winked at Barrett. "Don't know how much skiing he gets done, though. I think he goes for the company more than anything else. What's wrong?"

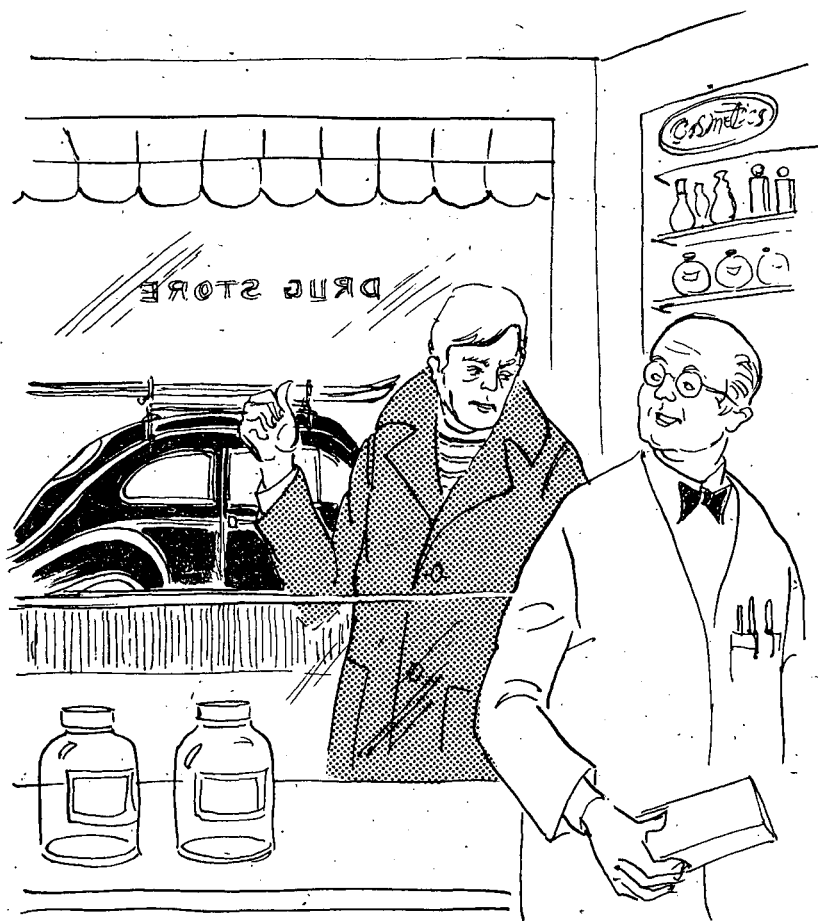
"That car almost ran me off the road this morning," said Barrett.

"Pete did that? Are you sure?"

"You don't forget a car that color," said Barrett. "Where is he now?"

"Asleep. I told you he went for this *apres ski* stuff. He was out all night." He winked at Barrett again. "You know a lot of these kids come up from the city to ski. Some of them are real lookers, too. I can't blame him. Sometimes I wish I wasn't so old. Some of these young girls . . ."

Barrett felt a sense of distaste, as if Carey had said something obscene. "How old is he?"



"Turned twenty-one last summer."

"I thought he'd be in college."

Carey's eyes shifted, flicking around the store. "Well, he's not much interested in that. He helps me out occasionally."

Barrett didn't need it spelled out

any further. The apologetic tone admitted that Pete Carey was a ski bum. Barrett decided to let the incident go. Carey had enough trouble. "Tell him to drive more carefully," he said. "I'll see you later."

"I guess you'll be around here

a lot more, now that Lou is gone.”

Barrett couldn't tell if that made Carey happy or not. “That remains to be seen,” he said. Evidently there was no one in town who didn't expect him to take over the paper.

Carey, reaching for Barrett's hand, brushed a small prescription bottle from the counter. It splattered on the marble floor with a small crash. Carey grinned weakly. “Part of the profits gone.”

Wondering if Carey became nervous every time he talked about his son, Barrett shook his hand and stepped out into the cold afternoon.

The newspaper office was a former store, fronted with a plate glass window and a door tucked away in a little vestibule. The shades were drawn. Overhead, a sign in Old English lettering said: *Fox River Tribune, Lou Beck, Editor-Publisher*. The sign was weather-beaten and old. *Like Lou*, thought Barrett.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. A rail and a waist-high counter separated the office from the door, not enough of a barrier to keep the cold draft from reaching a young woman at a desk in the corner. She stood up.

She was dark-haired and tall, wearing a turtleneck jersey over a plaid skirt, white boots almost reaching her knees. Her nose was small and upturned, giving her a

pleasantly aggressive look and her eyes were widely spaced above a generous mouth. It was the kind of face that would wear well through the years, Barrett decided.

“I'm Page Barrett,” he said, pushing his way through a swinging gate into the office itself. “You must be Cindy Neal.”

She nodded. “We've been expecting you.” She indicated the back room and Barrett was aware of the soft hum of a motor, the spaced *whump* and the familiar staccato tinkle of brass mats dropping that told him someone was operating a Linotype machine. “Tom Cottrell is here.”

Barrett wondered what Cottrell would be working on. He slipped off his coat and moved to the back room.

Cottrell looked up over the copy board and shifted a pipe from one side of his mouth to the other. “Page. Wondered when you'd get here.”

“Working on the paper?” Barrett was puzzled. “I would think—”

“Figured Lou would want it this way. Paper is almost complete and would be a waste not to print it. I was thinking that if you showed up you could write a story about Lou. I can fit it in on page one by dropping something.”

“That's what a good newspaperman would do,” Barrett said dryly.

Cottrell removed the pipe and studied it. "Lou would do it. He'd expect you to do the same. The people in this county buy the paper to read the news and no matter how he died, Lou's death is news. You can't deny that."

"No," said Barrett. "I can't deny that, but I'm more interested in finding out who killed him and why. What do you know?"

"Nothing." He drew on the pipe reflectively. "Nothing you can ask me that I haven't already asked myself, Page, and I've got no answers."

He sat behind the Linotype machine, a thin, narrow-chested man dressed in blue work clothes, his sleeves rolled up on sinewy arms, metal-rimmed spectacles pushed up into his gray hair. Barrett was sure that Cottrell was working, not because he didn't care what had happened to Lou, but because he cared a great deal and preferred to keep busy rather than think about it.

"I guess I can still write a story," Barrett said gently. "Not as well as Lou, but good enough."

He stepped into the office. To his left were a half dozen steel filing cabinets; to his right a small heavy iron safe that Barrett knew held nothing but bookkeeping records. Along one wall was Cindy Neal's desk, and an ancient, massive typewriter on a wheeled stand flanked Lou Beck's rolltop desk and chair.

Opposite the desk, a large drawing table held a pad of newspaper layout sheets that Lou used to guide Cottrell in making up the pages, filling in the blank columns with the ads and the stories as they developed. There would be a set of those for this issue in the back room and Cottrell would require no help from Barrett there.

Rhodes had been right. There was absolutely nothing in the office worth stealing.

The top of the desk was raised, the pigeonholes exposed and filled with projecting papers, but the working area of the desk was clean. Barrett frowned. That was unusual. He could not recall a time when Lou did not have papers scattered about, limiting himself to a small area in which to work.

"Who cleaned the desk?" he asked Cindy.

"I don't know," she said. "It was like that when I came in early this morning. Instead of going to the high school, I went to your aunt's house. I stayed with her for a few hours before coming here."

"Lou was working at the desk when you left last night?"

"As usual. He had papers scattered—" She stopped, realizing what Barrett was implying. "They're gone," she said. "Whatever he was working on is gone. There were some photographs,

too," she added circumspectly. "Photographs?"

She nodded. "I didn't look at them but I know they were there."

Barrett picked up the phone. Automatic dialing for Fox River was still a year away, and the operator's voice asked him for his number. "I want Chief Rhodes," he said.

He wasted no time when Rhodes answered. "Grant, did you clean off Lou's desk when you removed the body?"

There was a silence. "No," said Rhodes finally. "As near as I can remember, the desk was clean. You onto something?"

"I think I know what the killer took from the office."

"Something valuable?"

"I can't see how," said Barrett. "It was just a story and some photos." He cradled the phone gently, wondering what there could possibly be about a news item in a small town weekly that would be worth stealing.

Cindy Neal had moved closer to him and he caught the faint scent of an indefinable perfume. It was a pleasing scent, a bright, fresh fragrance very much different than anything his wife would wear.

"You have any idea of what Lou was writing?" he asked.

"Not exactly. I know he had been spending some time at the Big Bear Mountain Ski Resort. He'd been

over there often the last few days."

"Do you know who he was seeing?"

"A man named Horn, I believe. You could talk to him."

He slipped into his coat. "I'll need my car."

She dangled keys before him. "No need. We'll take mine."

Barrett couldn't say no. He had to admit he would enjoy her company.

She made the thirty miles to Big Bear Mountain in a half hour, handling the car expertly, downshifting smoothly on the occasionally slippery road without losing speed. The ski resort was off the main highway on a back road that seemed to wind halfway around the mountain. Before they pulled into the parking lot, Barrett could see the two chair lifts operating to capacity, carrying brightly dressed skiers to the top of the long slopes.

The lodge at the foot of the chair lifts was low and rambling, bigger than Barrett remembered, and he realized that several additions had been built since he had last been here. They found Horn in a walnut-paneled office, a pale gnome of a man wearing ski boots and casual clothes that Barrett would have bet had never seen a ski slope.

"I'm sorry to hear about Mr. Beck," he said, "but I don't see how I can help."

"He'd been to see you several times in connection with a story on which he was working," said Barrett. "Can you tell us what it was?"

"Of course. I had been thinking of producing a brochure. We get many inquiries about our facilities and the one I'm using now is rather out of date. Mr. Beck and I were cooperating on a new one. I had provided him with the details and some photographs and he was going to print it."

It sounded logical. Lou had run a little job-printing business to fill in between issues of the paper, drawing most of it from local businessmen.

"Nothing more than that?"

Horn frowned. "I fail to understand."

"Whoever killed my uncle took both the photographs and the copy for your brochure. Would you know why?"

"Fantastic," murmured Horn. "I would have no idea or even what purpose it would serve. I do have additional photos, so the thief would really accomplish nothing. As far as the copy is concerned, that is easily rewritten."

Barrett stared. "You have *duplicate* photos?"

"I always order extras for publicity uses. I do regret, however, that I also gave your uncle the negatives. He did not consider the prints I

gave him suitable for reproduction purposes, and he intended to have some made that would meet his standards."

"So the thief would have been under the impression there were no other prints and there could be none since he had the negatives?"

"I imagine he would, but I still fail to see why he would bother. The photos were routine shots of the lodge, the slopes, the lifts, all our facilities. There could be absolutely nothing in them that would be of value. If anyone had asked, I would have been happy to present him a set. Furthermore, even if they had all been completely destroyed, it would present no big problem to have them retaken."

"Obviously the killer was interested only in those particular photos," said Cindy.

Barrett appealed to Horn. "May we see the duplicates?"

Horn swung around to a filing cabinet and fingered his way through a sheaf of papers until he found an envelope. He handed it to Barrett.

"I regret they are not in color," he said. "Your uncle had no facilities for that type of printing."

Barrett spread the 8 x 10 prints on Horn's desk. There were more than a dozen, taken in and around the lodge and the slopes, as Horn had said, most featuring laughing



people in ski clothing. Several were almost stock shots of skiers plummeting down the slopes, trailing plumes of snow.

Cindy picked up a couple of breathtaking views of the snow-covered valley, taken from the chair lift as it descended the moun-

tain, showing the valley spread out, the roads dark slices through the snow, the lodge at the foot of the lift, the parking lot full.

"When were they taken?" she asked.

"Just last week," said Horn. "They are the most recent ones we

have. I had them made especially for this brochure." He indicated the photos in her hand. "I think these are particularly well done. They show the size of the lodge so well."

The phrase *last week* jarred Barrett. Rhodes had used the same words about the girl who had been killed. "The girl who was murdered," he said to Cindy. "What day was it?"

"Last Tuesday," she said.

He looked at Horn. "And when were the photos taken?"

"The same day. It was originally scheduled for the weekend, but clouds prevented that. Luckily, we had a rather healthy crowd on Tuesday, so it was decided to do it then."

Barrett and Cindy looked at each other, each having the same thought: there might be a connection between the photos and the murder of the girl. *But what?* Barrett flipped through the photos again, seeing nothing that could possibly be relevant. "May we borrow these?" he asked Horn.

"Certainly." Horn placed the photos in an envelope and handed them to Cindy. "I will need them for my brochure eventually."

"We'll take good care of them," promised Barrett. He held the door open for Cindy, feeling that she was carrying something valuable, even though he didn't know what it was.

They were crossing the parking lot when the red VW flashed by, dangerously close, and Barrett felt a quick surge of anger. He followed the car into a parking slot just as a young man with long brown hair, dressed in a dark green ski parka, stepped out.

"Are you Pete Carey?" asked Barrett.

"Do I know you?"

"You should. You cut me off this morning and forced me off the road, then you came a little too close to us now to suit me. I don't like the way you drive."

"Drop dead," said Pete nastily.

It wasn't the words as much as the tone that made Barrett's hand flash out, viciously backhanding Pete across the face, driving him into the side of the VW. Barrett regretted the move the moment he made it and stepped back, ready to apologize, but Pete came off the car, a knife suddenly in his hand, his face transformed, no longer young and smooth but somehow old, ancient with hate and hurt, animalistic with a growling fury that made Barrett step back, confronted with something dark and primitive and frightening.

Barrett's breath froze in his chest and a phrase he had once read popped into his mind. *The face of madness*, he thought, and then the knife was flashing toward him and

Barrett reached out, seized the arm and twisted desperately, smashing the hand against the cold steel of the car until the fingers released the knife, while Pete clawed at his face and eyes with his free hand, spitting obscenities.

Barrett pivoted, throwing Pete over his shoulder and pinning him to the ground, feeling a touch of panic because he knew that losing the knife wouldn't let Pete end it; that Pete was determined to kill him, with his bare hands if necessary; and Barrett held him there, one knee on his chest, the other on his arm, still clasping Pete's other arm with both hands, not wanting to face the thought that the fight wouldn't end until one of them was dead, when Pete suddenly became quiet and his face smoothed over and Barrett was holding an ordinary-looking young man who looked up at him with a hurt expression as if questioning what Barrett was doing.

Barrett released him and stood up. Pete lay there, staring up at him.

Barrett turned away, feeling the after-fight reaction setting in, his stomach muscles knotting and un-knotting, nausea gagging him, his arms and legs trembling. He made his way to the car and collapsed into the front seat. Cindy followed, silent and almost as shaken as he

was. She stared straight ahead.

Barrett breathed deeply, forcing his body to stop quivering, knowing that for the second time that day Pete Carey had pushed him to the edge of death.

"He could have killed you," whispered Cindy.

"He *would* have," said Barrett, "but it's over now and you can bet I'll stay clear of him from now on. Someday he's going to hurt someone very badly. I don't want it to be me."

"What do we do now?"

Early winter dark was setting in as Barrett reached across the seat and took the photographs from her. "Back to the office. After Pete Carey, I need a change of pace. I'll work up the story on Lou so Cottrell can have it in the morning."

"I'll leave you there," she said. "I want to check on your aunt."

"Good," said Barrett. "Come back later and we'll go over the photos."

She dropped him off in front of the newspaper office. A headache that had been dull and quiet all day had matured into a fierce throbbing that threatened to split Barrett's head open. He crossed the street to the drugstore. It was empty now except for an elderly woman just turning away from the prescription counter and Allen Carey. Barrett decided it would be wise not to

mention his fight with Carey's son.

"I need something that will work fast on a headache," he told Carey.

Carey nodded sympathetically. "Just the thing for you, Page." He poured some white pills into a small envelope and handed them to Barrett. "I find these a little better than plain aspirin. Let me get you a glass of water."

Barrett followed him to the soda fountain and gulped down two of the pills.

"Anything develop about your uncle?" asked Carey.

"Possibly." Barrett tapped the envelope. "I may have something in here that will help."

Carey craned his head to read the return address. "You picked up something at Big Bear?"

Barrett slipped the envelope under his arm. "Some publicity photos."

"Photos?" There was an odd note in Carey's voice.

"Yeah. Want to check them before turning them over to Grant Rhodes. How much do I owe you for the pills?"

Carey waved. "On the house. I hope they work for you."

Barrett had the impression he had suddenly lost Carey, that Carey's mind had fled elsewhere, that Carey never even noticed his departure.

Cottrell heard him come in and

appeared in the doorway to the rear room, wiping his hand on a rag. "Nothing left for me to do. She's all locked up and ready to be put to bed, except for page one. Found an old cut of Lou I can use. All I need is the story. You going to write that?"

"Right now," Barrett told him. "It will be waiting for you in the morning."

"Make any progress?"

"We have a lead, but it's too soon to tell." He slipped out of his coat and rubbed his cold hands together. "You've had a long day, Tom. You might as well go. I'll finish the story and lock up. We'll start printing tomorrow."

"Lou would like that." Cottrell hesitated. "Just want to say, Page, that whatever you decide to do about the paper is all right with me. A man has to do what he has to do. When do you think you'll decide?"

Barrett pulled the typewriter table toward him and rolled in a sheet of copy paper. "Soon, I guess, Tom. There are many people who expect an answer."

After Cottrell left, Barrett sat staring at the keys. *Many people*, he thought; *his wife, Elmdorf, Aunt Edna, Cottrell and even Cindy Neal, all of their small worlds temporarily orbiting around Barrett.* Wishing that the responsibility belonged to someone else, he shook

his head and then began to type: *Lou G. Beck, editor and publisher of the Fox River Tribune, was found shot to death in his office late in the evening of . . .*

The words didn't come easily. It had been a long time since he had sat at a typewriter and put into practice the things that Lou had taught him. It had never been easy, he realized. Lou had just made it seem that way. He finished with a short biographical sketch of Lou and pulled the paper from the typewriter. He scanned it, made a few pencil corrections and set it aside, reaching for the photographs taken at Big Bear.

One by one, he studied them, seeing nothing that meant anything, knowing he was overlooking a detail that was important to someone else, knowing, too, that it would have had significance to his uncle; but there was no way Barrett could put himself in the old man's place, know what he knew, think his thoughts, draw the same conclusions.

No way? His uncle had a method of looking at photographs that Barrett had almost forgotten, a trick he used to be certain that some obscure background detail he didn't want couldn't slip by him.

Barrett took a blank sheet of paper and tore a hole in it about an inch square, then took the photo-

graphs in turn, placing his make-shift mask over each and sliding it across the surface, concentrating his attention only on what appeared in the ragged window. He saw things in the photographs that he hadn't noticed before, but none triggered an idea until he was sliding his mask across one of the views of the valley taken from the chair lift. As closely as he was watching, he still almost missed it, a somehow familiar bug-shaped spot against a background of snow.

He slipped the mask away and searched his uncle's desk until he found his magnifying glass and focused it on the spot.

There was no question now. Enlarged, it was a VW with skis strapped to its rear deck. Seeing one at this time of the year in the valley was ordinary enough. There were many, including Pete Carey's. What intrigued Barrett was that this one didn't seem to be traveling along any of the snow-covered back roads. Instead, it was some distance from the nearest one, evidently following a service track through the snow that some farmer used to reach the back sections of his property in winter. The thought struck Barrett that the car was parked, but why in such an out-of-the-way spot? If there were an answer, he didn't know what it was.

Barrett tossed the picture aside

and picked up another to find he could no longer concentrate on what he was doing. That VW in the middle of nowhere bothered him. Maybe Cindy would have an explanation for it when she came back. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair, thinking that he was more tired than he realized. Carey's pills had eliminated the headache but they also must have contained some sort of sedative. Barrett felt a warm lassitude creeping upward from his legs.

He hadn't heard the door open, but a cold draft made him look up as Allen Carey came through the swinging gate.

"Pete told me what happened," said Carey.

"I apologize for that. I was sorry I lost my temper."

Carey waved away his apology. "Pete gave you a lot of trouble, didn't he?"

"You could say that. In my opinion, he needs some sort of psychiatric attention before he hurts someone."

"I don't think it's that bad. He's just a confused young boy. He'll grow out of it."

He was no longer a boy and there was no chance he would grow out of it, Barrett knew, but then it wasn't his concern. He had problems of his own. He merely nodded, saying nothing.

Carey had been edging forward into the office. Barrett realized he was staring at the photos on the desk.

"May I see those?" There was a strange note in Carey's voice.

"I think not. They are the only set and I'm responsible for them."

"Lou had photos of Big Bear yesterday. I suppose these are different?"

Barrett was no longer tired. As far as he knew, only Cindy, Horn and himself were aware that the killer had taken the original set. "No," he said cautiously. "These are the same. Horn had duplicates."

Carey's face was the color of Camembert that had aged too long. "You looked at them?"

"Of course," said Barrett.

"Ah," said Carey, sounding as if he were gagging. "Let me see the pictures."

"What for?"

Carey's hand went under his coat and came out with a gun, the kind that almost every kid in the county used for small game and target practice. Barrett froze. Carey's hand might be trembling, but at this range he wasn't shaking enough to miss.

"I didn't want this to happen. I never thought it would happen." Carey sounded as if he might start weeping at any moment. Perspiration glistened on his forehead.

His eyes flicked around the room as if driven by tumbling thoughts.

"You'll have to tell me," Barrett said. "Give me a reason for the gun."

"Lou brought a picture to me yesterday. There was something he wanted to ask about."

Barrett, his mind half-numbed by the gun, was trying to sort it all out when it became clear; beautifully clear. "A Volkswagen," he said. "Parked where it had no right to be. Near where the girl was killed. Lou wanted to know if it was Pete's car, where Pete had been that day."

Carey nodded. "I see you think the same as Lou. He said he was going to have Grant Rhodes ask Pete about it. I couldn't allow that."

"Because you knew that Pete had killed the girl. Once Grant Rhodes started to question him—"

"No," Carey interrupted. "Pete didn't kill the girl."

Barrett thought of the secret Pete Carey he had glimpsed that afternoon. Someone like that could have easily raped and strangled.

"Yes," he said. "Pete killed her. So you came in here last night, killed Lou, one of your best friends, and took the photos and the negatives to protect a son you know should be locked up somewhere."

"That wasn't the way it was," cried Carey. "That's not how it was at all. There is nothing wrong with

Pete. Nothing, you hear me? All Pete could have told Rhodes was that he didn't have the car that afternoon, that someone had borrowed it."

"Then you're a fool, Allen. Who borrowed the car?"

"Don't you understand?" Carey's voice was almost a wail. "It was me!"

The only sound in the room was Carey's labored breathing. *Ah now, thought Barrett, not Carey himself. Not Carey, the pharmacist who had helped so many people, responsible now for two killings and intent on a third.*

"Why, Allen?" he asked gently. "I can see that you felt you had to kill Lou to get the pictures, but why the girl in the first place?"

"You just don't know what it's like in this town, seeing your life slip away. The years go and suddenly you're old and you haven't done anything."

"What does that have to do with it?"

Carey passed a hand over his face. "She made me feel young again. For just a minute . . . Then it happened. She was going to tell." He straightened suddenly, eyes no longer shifting, no longer trembling. "It doesn't matter now." The gun leveled at Barrett's head. "I have to do this, Page. I can't let anyone find out. You shouldn't have

interfered. You don't belong here anymore."

Barrett realized that talking would do no good. There was a set to Carey's expression and a light in his eyes that reminded Barrett of Pete Carey holding a knife. Carey was far beyond listening. He would hear only what he wanted to hear.

Barrett picked up the photograph and held it out. "This is what you want, Allen. Why not take it and go?"

"No. There would be nothing to keep you from telling Grant Rhodes."

Barrett casually placed his feet on the cross-brace of the heavy typewriter table. He tossed the photo at Carey and as Carey's eyes followed it, he violently pushed the typewriter stand toward him, using both feet and hands. If Carey had been a professional, he would have killed Barrett before the photo fluttered to the floor but Carey was an overwrought, confused pharmacist. The typewriter stand, heavy machine tottering, catapulted across the office and smashed Carey across the thighs, doubling him up, the pistol falling as Carey dropped his hands to protect himself.

Barrett dived across the office and scooped up the pistol. Carey, bent over the stand, looked at him pleadingly, lips moving in some sort of silent entreaty. Barrett almost

felt sorry for the crazed druggist.

They were standing like that when Rhodes and Cindy Neal came through the door. Rhodes looked at the pistol in Barrett's hands. "What's that thing for? Allen charge you too much for a prescription?"

Barrett handed it to him. "Save the jokes. I think you'll find this killed Lou." He indicated Carey. "He pulled the trigger. He'll tell you why, but if he doesn't, you'll still develop enough to hold him on two counts of murder."

"Two counts?"

"He also killed the girl last week."

Rhodes had been a police officer too long to let any emotion show but Barrett knew the news must have jolted him clear down to his polished shoes.

"I thought I was coming here to look at some photos," Rhodes said slowly. "Cindy called me and said you might have something. I didn't expect this. Suppose you start at the beginning."

Barrett explained while Carey stood there, a small, putty-faced fat man who didn't look dangerous at all, and Cindy leaned on the counter, eyes fixed on Barrett.

"That's the third time today you almost got yourself killed," said Cindy wondering when he had finished.

"I seem to have that trouble with the Carey family," said Barrett dryly. "But he showed the gun too soon. Lou turned his back on him before he knew Carey had one. We should have guessed that Lou knew the man who killed him, knew him well enough to let him get behind him without suspecting anything."

Rhodes placed a hand on Carey's arm. "I'll take him over to the station. You stop by later and we'll talk some more." He led Carey out.

Cindy sighed. "At least it is all over now."

"Almost," said Barrett. "There is still the paper to print and Lou's funeral to be attended."

"And then?" There was an unsaid hope in her voice, a hope that the paper wouldn't die as Lou had died, a hope that Barrett would stay.

She looked young, exceedingly beautiful and very vulnerable. It was a look that Barrett hadn't seen on a woman's face in a long time.

Instead of being tempted, he merely felt old.

Allen Carey had been right on two counts when he said, "You don't belong here, Page."

The first was that Barrett was a

different breed from a different age, from a faster moving, entirely different world, and he was no Lou Beck, with little of the old man's talent and skill. Barrett couldn't run the paper, not the way the old man had run it.

The second was that Barrett's problem wasn't with his wife but with himself. He had clung too long to the dream that many men had; that it was possible to go back, to erase the years that brought him to this time and place. He had carved out an existence that might not be all he hoped it would be, but in many ways it was satisfying and, above all, it belonged to him and was no poor imitation of someone else.

Carey's words echoed: "You don't belong here, Page."

Barrett sighed. When they buried Lou Beck, they would bury part of Page Barrett, too: the part that had grown up here and developed here, though that part had been dead a long time, much longer than Lou Beck. Barrett had simply never realized it.

He looked at Cindy, smiled, and said, "And then I'll go home."

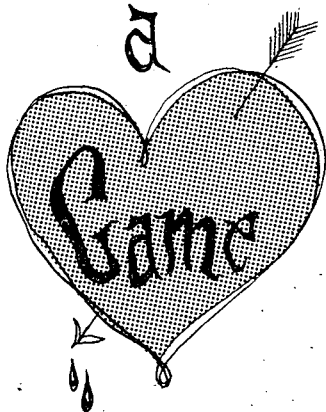


Given a number of variables, there may, indeed, be no limit to the degree of variation from a set pattern.



Variations

on
a



It was an impossible situation. Penn Knowlton had realized that as soon as he realized he was in love with Ginnie Ostrander—Mrs. David Ostrander. Penn couldn't see himself in the role of a marriage-

breaker, even though Ginnie said she had wanted to divorce David long before she met him. David wouldn't give her a divorce, that was the point. The only decent thing to do, Penn had decided, was to clear out, leave before David suspected anything. Not that he considered himself noble, but there were some situations . . .

Penn went to Ginnie's room on the second floor of the house and knocked.

Her rather high, cheerful voice called, "You, Penn? Come in!"

She was lying on the sunlit chaise longue, wearing black, close-fitting slacks and a yellow blouse, and she was sewing a button on one of David's shirts.

"Don't I look domestic?" she asked, pushing her yellow hair back from her forehead. "Need any buttons sewed on, darling?" Sometimes she called him darling when David was around, too.

"No," he said, smiling, and sat down on a hassock.

She glanced at the door as if to make sure no one was about, then pursed her lips and kissed the

empty air between them. "I'll miss you this weekend. What time are you leaving tomorrow?"

"David wants to leave just after lunch. It's my last assignment, Ginnie. David's last book with me. I'm quitting."

slowly stood up, drawing her up with him. "I'll be around another two weeks, probably; long enough for David to finish this book, if he wants me around that long. And you needn't worry. I won't tell him why I'm quitting." His voice had



"Quitting?" She let her sewing fall into her lap. "You've told David, too?"

"No. I'll tell him tomorrow. I don't know why you're surprised. You're the reason, Ginnie. I don't think I have to make any speeches."

"I understand, Penn. You know I've asked for a divorce. But I'll keep on asking. I'll work something out and then—" She was on her knees suddenly in front of him, crying, her head down on her hands that gripped his hands.

He turned his eyes away and

sunk to a whisper, though David was downstairs in his soundproofed study, and the maid, Penn thought, was in the basement.

"I wouldn't care if you told him," she said with quiet defiance.

"It's a wonder he doesn't know."

"Will you be around, say in three months, if I can get a divorce?" she asked.

He nodded, then feeling his own eyes start to burn, he smiled. "I'll be around an awful long time. I'm just not so sure you want a divorce."

Her eyebrows drew down, stubborn and serious. "You'll see. I don't want to make David angry. I'm afraid of his temper, I've told you that. But maybe I'll have to stop being afraid." Her blue eyes looked straight into his. "Remember that dream you told us, about the man you were walking with on the country road, who disappeared? And you kept calling him and you couldn't find him?"

"Yes," he said, smiling.

"I wish it would happen to you—with David. I wish David would just disappear suddenly, this week-end, and be out of my life forever, so I could be with you."

Her words did strange and terrible things to him. He released her arm. "People don't just disappear. There're other ways." He was going to add, "Such as divorce," but he didn't.

"Such as?"

"I'd better get back to my typewriter. I've got another half-hour tape to do."

David and Penn left in the black convertible the next afternoon with a small suitcase apiece, one typewriter, the tape recorder, and an iced carton of steaks and beer and a few other items of food. David was in a good mood, talking about an idea that had come to him during the night for a new book. David Os-

trander wrote science fiction so prolifically that he used half a dozen pen names. He seldom took longer than a month to write a book, and he worked every month of the year. More ideas came to him than he could use, and he was in the habit of passing them on to other writers at his Wednesday night Guild meetings.

David Ostrander was forty-three, lean and wiry, with a thin, dry-skinned face thatched with fine, intersecting wrinkles—the only part of him that showed his age at all and exaggerated it at that—wrinkles that looked as if he had spent all his forty-three years in the dry, sterile winds of the fantastic planets about which he wrote.

Ginnie was only twenty-four, Penn remembered, two years younger than himself. Her skin was pliant and smooth, her lips like a poppy's petals. He stopped thinking about her. It irked him to think of David's lips kissing hers. How could she have married him? Or why? Or was there something about David's intellect, his bitter humor, his energy, that a woman would find attractive? Of course David had money, a comfortable income plus the profits of his writing, but what did Ginnie do with it? Nice clothes, yes, but did David ever take her out? They hardly ever entertained. As far as Penn had

been able to learn, they had never traveled anywhere.

"Eh? What do you think of that, Penn? The poison gas emanating from the blue vegetation and conquering the green until the whole earth perishes! Say, where are you today?"

"I got it," Penn said without taking his eyes from the road. "Shall I put it down in the notebook?"

"Yes. No. I'll think about it a little more today." David lit another cigarette. "Something's on your mind, Penn, my boy. What is it?"

Penn's hands tightened on the wheel. Well, no other moment was going to be any better, was it? A couple of Scotches this evening wouldn't help, just be a little more cowardly, Penn decided. "David, I think after this book is over, I'll be leaving you."

"Oh," said David, not manifesting any surprise. He puffed on his cigarette. "Any particular reason?"

"Well, as I've told you, I have a book of my own to write. The Coast Guard thing." Penn had spent the last four years in the Coast Guard, which was the main reason David had hired him as a secretary. David had advertised for a secretary "preferably with a first-hand knowledge of Navy life." The first book he had worked on with David had a Navy background—

Navy life in 2800 A.D., when the whole globe had been made radioactive. Penn's book would have to do with real life, and it had an orthodox plot, ending on a note of hope. It seemed at that moment a frail and hopeless thing compared to a book by the great David Ostrander.

"I'll miss you," David said finally. "So'll Ginnie. She's very fond of you, you know."

From any other man it might have been a snide comment, but not from David, who positively encouraged him to spend time with Ginnie, to take walks in the woods around the estate with her, to play tennis on the clay court behind the summerhouse. "I'll miss you both, too," Penn said. "And who wouldn't prefer the environment to an apartment in New York?"

"Don't make any speeches, Penn. We know each other too well." David rubbed the side of his nose with a nicotine-stained forefinger. "What if I put you on a part-time basis and gave you most of the day for your own work? You could have a whole wing of the house to yourself."

Penn declined it politely. He wanted to get away by himself for a while.

"Ginnie's going to sulk," David said, as if to himself.

They reached the lodge at sun-

down. It was a substantial one-story affair made of unhewn logs, with a stone chimney at one end. White birches and huge pine trees swayed in the autumn breeze. By the time they unpacked and got a fire going for the steak, it was seven o'clock. David said little, but he seemed cheerful, as if their conversation about Penn's quitting had never taken place. They had two drinks each before dinner, two being David's limit for himself on the nights he worked and also those on which he did not work, which were rare.

David looked at him across the wooden table. "Did you tell Ginnie you were leaving?"

Penn nodded, and swallowed with an effort. "I told her yesterday." Then he wished he hadn't admitted it. Wasn't it more logical to tell one's employer first?

David's eyes seemed to be asking the same question. "And how did she take it?"

"Said she'd be sorry to see me go," Penn said casually, and cut another bite of steak.

"Oh. Like that. I'm sure she'll be devastated."

Penn jumped as if a knife had been stuck into him.

"I'm not blind, you know, Penn. I know you two think you're in love with each other."

"Now listen, David, just a minute. If you possibly imagine—"

"I know what I know, that's all. I know what's going on behind my back when I'm in my study or when I'm in town Wednesday nights at the Guild meetings!" David's eyes shone with blue fire, like the cold lights of his lunar landscapes.

"David, there's nothing going on behind your back," Penn said evenly. "If you doubt me, ask Ginnie."

"Hah!"

"But I think you'll understand why it's better that I leave. I should think you'd approve of it, in fact."

"I do." David lit a cigarette.

"I'm sorry this happened," Penn added. "Ginnie's very young. I also think she's bored—with her life, not necessarily with you."

"Thanks!" David said like a pistol shot.

Penn lit a cigarette, too. They were both on their feet now. The half-eaten meal was over. Penn watched David moving about as he might have watched an armed man who at any minute might pull a gun or a knife. He didn't trust David, couldn't predict him. The last thing he would have predicted was David's burst of temper tonight, the first Penn had seen. "Okay, David. I'll say again that I'm sorry. But you've no reason to hold a grudge against me."

"That's enough of your words! I know a heel when I see one!"

"If you were my weight, I'd break your jaw for that!" Penn yelled, advancing on him with his fists clenched. "I've had enough of your words tonight, too. I suppose you'll go home and throw your bilge at Ginnie. Well, where do *you* get off, shoving a bored, good-looking girl at your male secretary, telling us to go off on picnic lunches together? Can you blame either of us?"

David muttered something unintelligible in the direction of the fireplace. Then he turned and said, "I'm going for a walk." He went out and slammed the thick door so hard that the floor shook.

Automatically, Penn began clearing the dishes away, the untouched salad. They had started the refrigerator, and Penn carefully put the butter away on a shelf. The thought of spending the night here with David was ghastly, yet where else could he go? They were six miles from the nearest town, and there was only one car.

The door suddenly opened, and Penn nearly dropped the coffeepot.

"Come out for a walk with me," David said. "Maybe it'll do us both good." He was not smiling.

Penn set the coffeepot back on the stove. A walk with David was the last thing he wanted, but he was afraid to refuse. "Have you got the flashlight?"

"No, but we don't need it. There's moonlight."

They walked from the lodge door to the car, then turned left onto the dirt road that went on for two miles, through the woods to the highway.

"This is a half moon," David said. "Mind if I try a little experiment? Walk on ahead of me, here where it's pretty clear, and let me see how much of you I can make out at thirty yards. Take big strides and count off thirty. You know, it's for that business about Faro."

Penn nodded. He knew. They were back on the book again, and they'd probably work a couple of hours tonight when they went back to the lodge. Penn started counting, taking big strides.

"Fine, keep going!" David called.

Twenty-eight . . . twenty-nine . . . thirty. Penn stopped and stood still. He turned around. He couldn't see David. "Hey! Where are you?"

No answer.

Penn smiled wryly, and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Can you see me, David?"

Silence. Penn started slowly back to where he had left David. A little joke, he supposed, a mildly insulting joke, but he resolved to take no offense.

He walked on toward the lodge, where he was sure he would find David thoughtfully pacing the floor

as he pondered his work, perhaps dictating already into the tape recorder; but the main room was empty. There was no sound from the corner room where they worked, nor from the closed room where David slept. Penn lit a cigarette, picked up the newspaper and sat down in the single armchair. He read with deliberate concentration, finished his cigarette and lit another. The second cigarette was gone when he got up, and he felt angry and a little scared at the same time.

He went to the lodge door and called, "David!" a couple of times, loudly. He walked toward the car, got close enough to see that there was no one sitting in it. Then he returned to the lodge and methodically searched it, looking even under the bunks.

What was David going to do, come back in the middle of the night and kill him in his sleep? No, that was crazy, as crazy as one of David's story ideas. Penn suddenly thought of his dream, remembered David's brief but intense interest in it the night he had told it at the dinner table. "Who was the man with you?" David had asked. But in the dream, Penn hadn't been able to identify him. He was just a shadowy companion on a walk. "Maybe it was me," David had said, his blue eyes shining. "Maybe you'd like me

to disappear, Penn." Neither Ginie nor he had made a comment, Penn recalled, nor had they discussed David's remark when they were alone. It had been so long ago, over two months ago.

Penn put that out of his mind. David had probably wandered down to the lake to be alone for a while, and hadn't been courteous enough to tell him. Penn did the dishes, took a shower and crawled into his bunk. It was 12:10. He had thought he wouldn't be able to sleep, but he was asleep in less than two minutes.

The raucous cries of ducks on the wing awakened him at 6:30. He put on his robe and went into the bathroom, noting that David's towel, which he had stuck hastily over the rack last night, had not been touched. Penn went to David's room and knocked. Then he opened the door a crack. The two bunks, one above the other, were still made up. Penn washed hurriedly, dressed, and went out.

He looked over the ground on both sides of the road where he had last seen David, looking for shoeprints in the moist pine needles. He walked to the lake and looked around its marshy edge; not a footprint, not a cigarette butt.

He yelled David's name, three times, and gave it up.

By 7:30 a.m. Penn was in the

town of Croydon. He saw a small rectangular sign between a barber's shop and a paint store that said POLICE. He parked the car, went into the station, and told his story. As Penn had thought, the police wanted to look over the lodge. Penn led them back in David's car.

The two policemen had heard of David Ostrander, not as a writer, apparently, but as one of the few people who had a lodge in the area. Penn showed them where he had last seen David, and told them that Mr. Ostrander had been experimenting to see how well he could see him at thirty yards.

"How long have you been working for Mr. Ostrander?"

"Four months. Three months and three weeks to be exact."

"Had he been drinking?"

"Two Scotches. His usual amount. I had the same."

Then they walked to the lake and looked around.

"Mr. Ostrander have a wife?" one of the men asked.

"Yes. She's at the house in Stonebridge, New York."

"We'd better notify her."

There was no telephone at the lodge. Penn wanted to stay on in case David turned up, but the police asked him to come with them back to the station, and Penn did not argue. At least he would be there when they talked with Gin-

nie, and he'd be able to speak with her himself. Maybe David had decided to go back to Stonebridge and was already home. The highway was only two miles from the lodge, and David could have flagged a bus or picked up a ride from someone, but Penn couldn't really imagine David Ostrander doing anything that simple or obvious.

"Listen," Penn said to the policemen before he got into David's convertible, "I think I ought to tell you that Mr. Ostrander is kind of an odd one. He writes science fiction. I don't know what his objective is, but I think he deliberately disappeared last night. I don't think he was kidnapped or attacked by a bear or anything like that."

The policemen looked at him thoughtfully.

"Okay, Mr. Knowlton," one of them said. "Now you drive on ahead of us, will you?"

Back at the station in Croydon, they called the number Penn gave them. Hanna, the maid, answered. Penn, six feet from the telephone, could hear her shrill, German-accented voice; then Ginnie came on. The officer reported that David Ostrander was missing since 10 o'clock last night, and asked her if she'd had any word from him. Ginnie's voice, after the first exclamation which Penn had heard, sounded alarmed. The officer

watched Penn as he listened to her.

"Yes . . . What's that again? . . . No, no blood or anything. Not a clue so far. That's why we're calling you." A long pause. The officer's pencil tapped but did not write. "I see . . . I see . . . We'll call you, Mrs. Ostrander."

"May I speak to her?" Penn reached for the telephone.

The captain hesitated, then said, "Good-bye, Mrs. Ostrander," and put the telephone down. "Well, Mr. Knowlton, are you prepared to swear that the story you told us is true?"

"Absolutely."

"Because I've just heard a motive if I ever heard one. A motive for getting Mr. Ostrander out of the way. Now, just what did you do to him—or maybe *say* to him?" The officer leaned forward, palms on his desk.

"What did she just tell you?"

"That you're in love with her and you might have wanted her husband out of the picture."

Penn tried to keep calm. "I was quitting my job to get *away* from the situation! I told Mr. Ostrander yesterday that I was going to quit, and I told his wife the day before."

"So you admit there was a situation."

The police, four of them now, looked at him with frank disbelief.

"Mrs. Ostrander's upset," Penn

said. "She doesn't know what she's saying. Can I talk to her, please? Now?"

"You'll see her when she gets here." The officer sat down and picked up a pen. "Knowlton, we're booking you on suspicion. Sorry."

They questioned him until 1 p.m., then gave him a hamburger and a paper container of weak coffee. They kept asking him if there hadn't been a gun at the lodge—there hadn't been—and if he hadn't weighted David's body and thrown it in the lake along with the gun.

"We walked half around the lake this morning," Penn said. "Did you notice any footprints anywhere?"

By that time, he had told them about his dream and suggested that David Ostrander was trying to enact it, an idea that brought incredulous smiles, and he had laid bare his heart in regard to Ginnie, and also his intentions with her, which were nil. Penn didn't say that Ginnie had said she was in love with him, too. He couldn't bear to tell them that, in view of what she had said about him.

They went into his past. No police record. Born in Raleigh, Virginia, graduated from the state university, a major in journalism, worked on a Baltimore paper for a year, then four years in the Coast Guard. A clean slate everywhere, and this the police seemed to be-

lieve. It was, specifically, the cleanliness of his slate with the Ostranders that they doubted. He was in love with Mrs. Ostrander and yet he was really going to quit his job and leave? Hadn't he any plans about her?

"Ask her," Penn said tiredly.

"We'll do that," replied the officer who was called Mac.

"She knows about the dream I had, too, and the questions her husband asked me about it," Penn said. "Ask her in privacy, if you doubt me."

"Get this, Knowlton," Mac said. "We don't fool around with dreams. We want facts."

Ginnie arrived a little after three p.m. Catching a glimpse of her through the bars of the cell they had put him in, Penn sighed with relief. She looked calm, perfectly in command of herself. The police took her to another room for ten minutes or so, and then they came and unlocked Penn's cell door. As he approached Ginnie, she looked at him with a hostility or fear that was like a kick in the pit of his stomach. It checked the "Hello, Ginnie" that he wanted to say.

"Will you repeat to him what he said to you day before yesterday, Mrs. Ostrander?" asked Mac.

"Yes. He said, 'I wish David would disappear the way he did in

my dream. I wish he were out of your life so I could be alone with you.'"

Penn stared at her. "Ginnie, *you* said that!"

"I think what we want to know from you, Knowlton, is what you did with her husband," said Mac.

"Ginnie," Penn said desperately, "I don't know why you're saying that. I can repeat every word of the conversation we had that afternoon, beginning with me saying I wanted to quit. That much you'll agree with, won't you?"

"Why, my husband had *fired* him—because of his attentions to *me*!" Ginnie glared at Penn and at the men around her.

Penn felt a panic, a nausea rising. Ginnie looked insane—or like a woman who was positive she was looking at her husband's murderer. There flashed to his mind her amazing coolness the moment after the one time he had kissed her, when David, by an unhappy stroke of luck, had tapped on her door and walked in. Ginnie hadn't turned a hair. She was an actress by nature, apparently, and she was acting now. "That's a lie and you know it," Penn said.

"And it's a lie what you said to her about wanting to get rid of her husband?" Mac asked.

"Mrs. Ostrander said that, I didn't," Penn replied, feeling sud-

denly weak in the knees. "That's why I was quitting. I didn't want to interfere with a marriage that—"

The listening policemen smiled. "My husband and I were devoted." Then Ginnie bent her head and gave in, it appeared, to the most genuine tears in the world.

Penn turned to the desk. "All right, lock me up. I'll be glad to stay here till David Ostrander turns up—because I'll bet my life he's not dead."

Penn pressed his palms against the cool wall of the cell. He was aware that Ginnie had left the station, but that was the only external circumstance of which he was aware.

A funny girl, Ginnie. She was mad about David, after all. She must worship David for his talent, for his discipline, and for his liking her. What was she, after all? A good-looking girl who hadn't succeeded as an actress (until now), who hadn't enough inner resources to amuse herself while her husband worked twelve hours a day, so she had started flirting with her husband's secretary. Penn remembered that Ginnie had said their chauffeur had quit five months ago. They hadn't hired another. Penn wondered if the chauffeur had quit for the same reason he had been going to leave? Or had David fired him?

Penn didn't dare believe anything, now, that Ginnie had ever said to him.

A more nightmarish thought crossed his mind: suppose Ginnie really didn't love David, and had stopped on her way to Croydon and found David in the lodge and had shot him? Or if she had found him on the grounds, in the woods, had she shot him and left him to be discovered later, so that he would get the blame? So that she would be free of David and free of him, too? Or was there even a gun in Stonebridge that Ginnie could have taken?

Did Ginnie hate David or love him? On that incredible question his own future might hang, because if Ginnie had killed him herself . . . But how did it explain David's voluntarily disappearing last night?

Penn heard footsteps and stood up.

Mac stopped in front of his cell. "You're telling the truth, Knowlton?" he asked a little dubiously.

"Yes."

"So, the worst that can happen is, you'll sit a couple of days till Ostrander turns up."

"I hope you're looking for him."

"That we are, all over the state and farther if we have to." He started to go, then turned back. "Thought I'd bring you a stronger light bulb and something to read, if

you're in any mood for reading."

There was no news the next morning.

Then, around four in the afternoon, a policeman came and unlocked Penn's cell.

"What's up?" Penn asked.

"Ostrander turned up at his house in Stonebridge," the man said with a trace of a smile.

Penn smiled, too, slightly. He followed him out to the front desk.

Mac gave Penn a nod of greeting. "We just called Mr. Ostrander's house. He came home half an hour ago. Said he'd taken a walk to do some thinking, and he can't understand what all the fuss is about."

Penn's hand shook as he signed his own release paper. He was dreading the return to the lodge to get his possessions, the inevitable few minutes at the Stonebridge house while he packed up the rest of his things.

David's convertible was at the curb where Penn had left it yesterday. He got in and headed for the lodge. There, he packed first his own things and closed his suitcase, then started to carry it and the tape recorder to the car, but on second thought decided to leave the tape recorder. How was he supposed to know what David wanted done with his stuff?

As he drove south toward Stone-

bridge, Penn realized that he didn't know what he felt or how he ought to behave. Ginnie: it wasn't worthwhile to say anything to her, either in anger or by way of asking her why. David: it was going to be hard to resist saying, "I hope you enjoyed your little joke. Are you trying to get a plot out of it?" Penn's foot pressed the accelerator, but he checked his speed abruptly. *Don't lose your temper*, he told himself. *Just get your stuff quietly and get out.*

Lights were on in the livingroom, and also in Ginnie's room upstairs. It was around nine o'clock. They'd have dined, and sometimes they sat a while in the livingroom over coffee, but usually David went into his study to work. Penn couldn't see David's study window. He rang the bell.

Hanna opened the door. "Mister Knowlton!" she exclaimed. "They told me you'd gone away for good!"

"I have," Penn said. "Just came by to pick up my things."

"Come right in, sir! Mister and Missus are in the livingroom. I'll tell them you're here." She went trotting off before he could stop her.

Penn followed her across the broad foyer. He wanted a look at David, just a look. Penn stopped a little short of the door. David and Ginnie were sitting close together

on the sofa, facing him, David's arm on the back of the sofa, and as Hanna told them he was here, David dropped his arm so that it circled Ginnie's waist. Ginnie did not show any reaction, only took a puff on her cigarette.

"Come on in, Penn!" David called, smiling. "What're you so shy about?"

"Nothing at all." Penn stopped at the threshold now. "I came to get my things, if I may."

"If you may!" David mocked. "Why, of course, Penn!" He stood up, holding Ginnie's hand now, as if he wanted to flaunt before Penn how affectionate they had become.

"Tell him to get his things and go," Ginnie said, smashing her cigarette in the ash tray. Her tone wasn't angry, in fact it was gentle, but she'd had a few drinks.

David came toward Penn, his lean, wrinkled face smiling. "I'll come with you. Maybe I can help."

Penn turned stiffly and walked to his room which was down the hall. He went in, dragged a large suitcase out of the bottom of a closet, and began with a bureau drawer, lifting out socks and pajamas. He was conscious of David watching him with an amused smile. The smile was like an animal's claws in Penn's back. "Where'd you hide that night, David?"

"Hide? Nowhere!" David

chuckled. "Just took a little walk and didn't answer you. I was interested to see what would happen. Rather I *knew* what would happen. Everything was just as I'd predicted."

"What do you mean?" Penn's hands trembled as he slid open his top drawer.

"With Ginnie," David said. "I knew she'd turn against you and turn to me. It's happened before, you see. You were a fool to think if you waited for her she'd divorce me and come to you. An absolute fool!"

Penn whirled around, his hands full of folded shirts. "Listen, David, I wasn't waiting for Ginnie. I was clearing out of this—"

"Don't give me that, you sneak! Carrying on behind your employer's back!"

Penn flung the shirts into his suitcase. "What do you mean, it's happened before?"

"With our last chauffeur. And my last secretary, too. I'd get a girl secretary, you see, but Ginnie likes these little dramas. They serve to draw us together and they keep her from getting bored. Your dream gave me a splendid idea for this one. You see how affectionate Ginnie is with me now? And she thinks you're a prize-winning sucker." David laughed and lifted his cigarette to his lips.

A second later, Penn landed the

hardest blow he had ever struck, on David's jaw. David's feet flew up in the wake of his body, and his head hit a wall six feet away.

Penn threw the rest of his things into his suitcase and crushed the lid down as furiously as if he were still fighting David. He pulled the suitcase off the bed and turned to the door.

Ginnie blocked his way. "What've you *done* to him?"

"Not as much as I'd like to do."

Ginnie rushed past him to David, and Penn went out the door.

Hanna was hurrying down the hall. "Something the matter, Mr. Knowlton?"

"Nothing serious. Good-bye, Hanna," Penn said, trying to control his hoarse voice. "And thanks," he added, and went on toward the front door.

"He's *dead*!" Ginnie cried wailingly.

Hanna was running to the room. Penn hesitated, then went on toward the door. The little liar! Anything for a dramatic kick!

"*Stop him!*" Ginnie yelled. "Hanna, he's trying to get away!"

Penn set his suitcase down and went back. He'd yank David up and douse his head in water. "He's not dead," Penn said as he strode into the room.

Hanna was standing beside David with a twisted face, ready for tears. "Yes—he is, Mr. Knowlton."

Penn bent to pull David up, but his hand stopped before it touched him. Something shiny was sticking out of David's throat, and Penn recognized it—the haft of his own paper knife that he'd neglected to pack.

A long, crazy laugh—or maybe it was a wailing sob—came from Ginnie behind him. "You *monster*! I suppose you wiped your fingerprints off it! But it won't do you any good, Penn! Hanna, call the police at once. Tell them we've got a murderer here!"

Hanna looked at her with horror. "I'll call them, ma'am. But it was you that wiped the handle. You were wiping it with your skirt when I came in the door."

Penn stared at Ginnie. He and she were not finished with each other yet.



When one has the very best, he should expect a professional job.

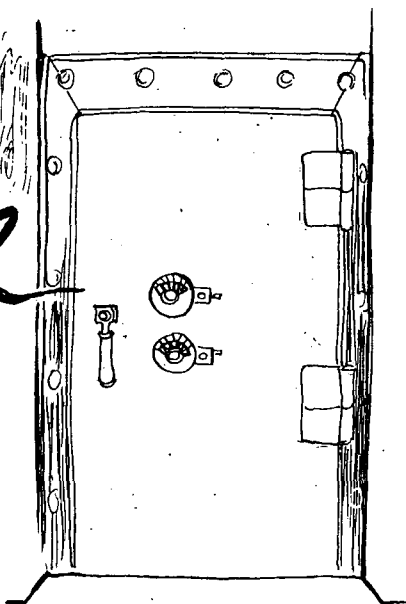
The Choice

Warren Manning smiled. "Could you open our vault, Eddie?"

Manning was a tall, dignified man. President of Manning & Coles, Pharmaceuticals, he sat behind the desk in his rich private office in a reserved gray suit that hung on him without a wrinkle. Eddie Berger was small and thin, and his suit was brown and old. He looked toward the massive vault in the wall of Manning's office.

"It's a good vault," Eddie said, "but there isn't any safe or vault made that I can't open. Only I don't open safes anymore, Mr. Manning. I've been clean for two years, and I'm staying clean. You don't have to worry."

"One week from today, Eddie, there will be \$250,000 in cash in



that vault," Warren Manning said. "I am going to steal that money, and I need you to open the vault."

He smiled amusedly at the expression on Eddie Berger's thin face: a mixture of shock and wariness.

"That's a bad joke for a man on parole," Eddie said.

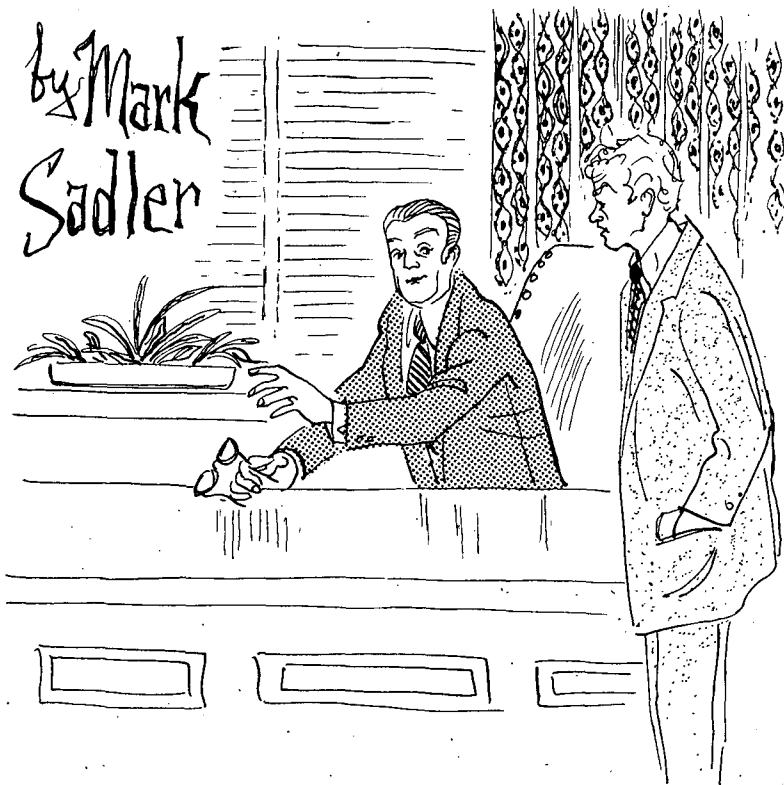
"It's not a joke, Eddie," Manning said.

Eddie Berger was silent. He seemed to think. His thin face became hard as stone.

Manning said. "It took time, but I found you."

Eddie Berger stood up. "Now you've lost me."

The little safecracker walked to



"There isn't any head bookkeeper job," Eddie said. "There never was. A break for an ex-con because he'd been clean for two years, you said. All a blind! You wanted a safecracker."

"A safecracker with a long record, and on parole," Warren

the door. The company president watched him try to open the door. It was locked.

Eddie turned to face Manning. "It's got an electric release. Open it!"

"Sit down," Manning said. "I've planned this robbery very carefully,

Eddie. You recall our second interview, when I had you deliver a package to a man at a restaurant?"

"Yes."

"There was morphine in that package. It's been reported stolen. The man you gave it to is a known drug peddler and I have pictures of your meeting. The pictures can be sent to the police at any time. Your meeting with that peddler is a parole violation in itself. Now, before we commit our robbery, no one would believe anything you told about me, and afterward it won't matter—I won't need any hold on you."

Eddie Berger still stood at the door. He said nothing.

"I can send you back to prison at any time between now and our robbery," Warren Manning said. "Sit down, Eddie."

"I open your safe for you, or I go back to prison."

"I don't think I've left you any other choices."

"This time, with my record, I'd be in jail forever."

"Or a little longer, I should expect," Manning said.

"So I don't really have a choice."

"None at all that I can see," Manning agreed.

Eddie Berger sat down again. Warren Manning's smile then broadened. Eddie shook his head.

"Don't try it, Mr. Manning," Ed-

die said. "I've been stealing all my life, and I've spent half my life in jail; six arrests, two stiff terms. And I'm good at it, a professional. You're not. You won't like prison."

"Are you comparing your intelligence with mine, Eddie?" Warren Manning said. "I told you I had planned it—neither of us will be caught. A completely *safe* robbery."

"I'm listening. Show me how smart you are, Mr. Manning."

Manning nodded, leaned forward in the quiet office. "I have no motive. I am relatively rich, in no trouble, owe no money, don't gamble. I'm a bachelor, I have no woman problem. I have absolutely no need of cash."

"Then why do it?"

"There is a reason, but it isn't one that will show—at least not for a long time. By then, even if it occurred to anyone, there would be no proof. At present, I can't be suspected."

"What about me? I'm a known box-man, with a known M.O."

"You'll have an alibi. Not perfect, of course, but reasonable. With a small change in your M.O., it will suffice."

"You're so sure. Why?"

"Because I am going to return to this office just in time to *see* the burglar escape! I will give a full description of the thief—a description

nothing like you. When the police, and the insurance company, find your alibi and my lack of any motive, they will accept the description, and search forever for a non-existent burglar. The money will never be found."

Eddie Berger thought. "You know, it might work."

"It will."

"Just why do you need me? Why not fake it yourself?"

"The police know a real robbery. My partner and I are the only ones with the combination. It must look expertly done by a pro."

Eddie nodded. "What's the split?"

"A hundred and fifty thousand for me, a hundred thousand for you, plus expenses. I want it to be worth your while."

"So do I. I've been clean two years. If I can't stay clean, then I'd better be rich." Eddie Berger stood up again. "Give me a day. I need to plan for after, and tell my wife."

"One day, Eddie," Manning said.

In the tiny livingroom of the cheap apartment where Eddie Berger and his wife had lived for the two long, hard years of going straight, Eddie shrugged. "We've got no choice, Grace. Manning's got me."

"You're sure, Eddie? We have to do it?"

"I'm sure. He's got me in a corner, so we might as well be as rich as we can be."

"You're sure it will work, Eddie?"

Eddie nodded. "It'll work."

"Manning scares me," Grace said, shivering.

"Don't worry about Manning. He's greedy, but he'll play it safe. He's got too much to lose."

"Well," Grace said, "the old life was kind of good. We had money, the best of everything. First class all the way—when you weren't in jail."

"No jail this time. We'll live high again, honey, even if it's back on the move. It was nice not being on the run, but it's been rough on an assistant bookkeeper's pay. Maybe it'll be good to have money again."

"And Manning's left us no choice."

"No way out," Eddie said. "You know what you have to do? The tickets and all?"

"I'll handle it, honey."

"Good."

Manning and Eddie met in a hotel room to go over the details. Neither was seen coming in.

"The money will be in the safe Monday night," Manning explained. "Unmarked bills, numbers not listed—it's the first payment for a large foreign shipment. You'll leave town Saturday night, establish

yourself at a resort with your wife. Monday night, you drive down at the last minute, your wife will act as if you're still at the resort in your room. As long as no one sees you leave or return, the police will have no reason to question your being there, even if they come around to you at all, which I don't think they will."

"I won't be seen. Grace knows what to do," Eddie said.

"Good. Now, when you arrive at my plant, wear white sneakers and something white in your hat so I'll know it's you—especially when you come out. How long will you need?"

"About an hour and a half. I usually use nitro, but I won't this time, to change the M.O."

Manning nodded. "When I see you and know you've got the money, I'll pretend to drive back up to the plant to go to my office to work late. I'll have let my partner know I'm planning to work late. When I reach the office, I'll yell that I found the safe cracked, and you going out the window. The light is excellent under my window, so I'll be able to give a good description. I don't think they'll even consider it could have been you, after they hear what I tell them."

"What's the guard and alarm setup?"

"One guard in the lobby, too far

away to bother you; a single watchman on patrol—I'll give you his time schedule; one guard at the yard gate. You'll have to handle him yourself."

"That's my job. No trouble on the guards."

"There's a simple basement alarm on the building; we're not a security-risk company. The vault has an alarm that sounds in a main security-company office. It's all supposed to look professional, so you'll have to handle the alarms, too."

"I can handle them," Eddie said. "What do I do with the money after I'm out? Your share, I mean."

"Take it to the bus station, check it into a locker. Then put the locker key in a car I'll have at the depot. The car won't be traceable to me. I'll give you the license number and make of car when I have it."

"Okay," Eddie agreed. "Now, I want at least half an hour after I come out before you go in and sound the alarm. I'll need that much time to arrange to stash my share of the money, and start back for the resort."

"All right, but no longer. The watchman on patrol checks in my office every two hours if I'm not there. We'll be cutting it rather fine, and I have to discover the safe open the moment I reach my office."

"A half an hour will do me fine."

Eddie said. "I have it all figured."

"Good. Then we won't have to meet again, will we?"

"I don't see why. I hope it all works out for both of us."

"It will, Eddie," Warren Manning said. "Just as planned."

"Yeah, just as planned," Eddie said.

It was just after 5:00 p.m. the next Monday when Warren Manning told his partner, George Coles, that he would be working late and needed the vault open.

"Don't you have to go to a meeting tonight?" Coles asked.

"Damn, the Chemistry Society! All right, I'll work until then, come back later. Unless you want to do my work tonight?"

"Suffer," Coles grinned. "I've got theater tickets."

"Have fun," Manning said.

After Coles left, it was Manning who grinned. He had established that he hadn't wanted to work late—an extra detail.

At six-thirty the watchman came for his first check. Manning nodded to him as if preoccupied. With the first check at six-thirty, the next two would be at eight-thirty and ten-thirty, as he had planned. Eddie Berger was due at eight-thirty. That was the plan—with one important change that Manning now started to put into effect.

He went to the vault, took out the quarter of a million dollars, and packed the money into a suitcase from his closet. Then he locked the vault, with its alarm set. He checked the corridor, and carried the bag of money down the rear stairs to a storeroom with a barred, unused side door into the plant warehouse. He crossed the silent warehouse, went out to his car, put the bag of money into the trunk, and returned to his office as he had come. He had not been seen.

He waited in his office until eight o'clock, then put on his hat and coat and went down to the front lobby.

"Be back about ten-thirty," he told the door guard.

Manning drove slowly to an open field less than a mile from the plant. Down in a small gully, he buried the bag of money in a hole he had dug earlier. He drove back to his plant and parked out of sight.

Just before eight-thirty, a small car drove into an alley near the plant. Manning saw the white sneakers of the man who came out of the alley carrying a black bag, and clearly recognized Eddie Berger's face under a street lamp. Berger vanished around a corner of the plant. Manning drove off.

He arrived at the Chemistry Society meeting soon after eight-thirty, spoke to many people who

knew him. Before ten o'clock, Manning slipped out of the meeting, drove back to his plant. Just after ten, Eddie Berger appeared once more. Manning saw the little safe-cracker look up and down the street, as if searching the night for the quarter of a million that had not been in the vault! Manning smiled. Then Eddie went into the alley, and the small car came out and drove away.

Manning gave Eddie twenty minutes to get a good start back to his alibi resort. Then he drove up to his plant, went in the front door, with a nod to the guard, and went up to his office. The safe stood open, expertly drilled, and a rope dangled out of the rear window.

Manning shouted, "Stop! Thief! Stop down there! Help! Thief!"

The watchman and the door guard came at a run. Manning pointed out the open window. "He was down there! A tall man, heavy and dark! Call the police!"

The guard went to the phone. The watchman went to the vault.

"A professional job, sir," the watchman said. "Was there—"

"Yes," Manning said, "a quarter of a million!" He bent down to the vault to hide his smile.

The police took charge, worked over the vault and office, and listened to Warren Manning's story.

"I stopped for a hamburger after my meeting, then came back here. As soon as I entered my office I saw the vault. I heard him below the window, looked out. It's light down there from the warehouse spotlight. I saw him clearly. A tall, heavy man—maybe two hundred pounds and dark—and I believe he was wearing green Army fatigues. He had the money in a sack!"

The police took the details, and let Manning go an hour later.

The company president drove straight home to his large house in an exclusive suburb. There he made himself a large Scotch and soda, settled in a comfortable armchair, and picked up his telephone. He dialed Eddie Berger's alibi resort.

"Hello, Eddie," Manning said. "I'm sorry, but I need the whole quarter of a million. You shouldn't be too surprised, a man with your experience in crime."

"No," Eddie said tightly. "You did a fine job on the vault. I'm grateful," Manning went on smoothly. "You won't mention any of this, of course. I gave a fine description of our imaginary burglar, so you should be quite safe, as I promised."

"Yes," Eddie said.

"As long as you say nothing, you will have no problem. To denounce me, you would have to incriminate yourself, and with your record you

would suffer much more than I would."

"I understand, Mr. Manning."

"Good, I thought you would. Good-bye, Eddie."

"So long, Mr. Manning," Eddie's low voice said.

In his silent livingroom, after he had hung up, Warren Manning sat smiling softly, his good Scotch in hand. That would take care of Eddie. The police would, of course, investigate his, Manning's, life, but they would find nothing. The insurance people might even be a little more suspicious, but they would find no motive.

In a few months, when the police had relegated the robbery to routine investigation, and the insurance company had given up their initial concern with it, Manning would dig up the money. He would invest it slowly and carefully under a false name or two, and in a few years he would have enough money to buy out his partner and take over the whole company.

That was his plan, and while someone might wonder how he had amassed the money, there would be no real evidence to be found in the maze of transactions and paper profit and loss he would build up.

The burglar and the money would never be found. A quarter of a million wasn't that much to an insurance company these days. Other

cases would have buried this one robbery by then. With any luck, the police might even find some safecracker somewhere who fitted his fake description closely enough to be arrested and even convicted for the robbery.

With that pleasant thought, Manning sat back to savor his good whisky and his success.

Three months later, the police had stopped asking questions of people who knew Warren Manning, had finished digging into his affairs. The insurance investigator no longer appeared in the offices of Manning & Coles. In fact, the insurance detective was no longer in the city. He had returned to New York and more recent cases.

During the three months, Manning conducted his normal business as if serenely unaware of anyone investigating his life, assets, needs and possible motives—but he had actually missed very little. He knew that his life had come out blameless, revealing no possible motive for such a crime. The police and the insurance man drew a complete blank, as he had been sure they would.

They had grumbled about the fact that Manning's description failed to fit any known safecracker. Manning assumed that they had talked to all known safe-men, prob-

ably including Eddie Berger, but Eddie's alibi must have stood up, since no mention was ever made of him.

The police were especially puzzled by the total lack of information from their informers on the burglar or the money. On the basis of all their experience, that was very unusual, so they finally concluded that the robbery had been the slick work of some expert outsider. So much for the conclusions of experience!

At the end of the three months Manning left the city, presumably on an important business trip to New York. He checked into a major hotel, purchased a reserved-seat ticket for a major movie he had already seen, and went out for an early dinner. With after-movie drinks, that would give Manning some six hours to go home and get the money, then return to New York. It was just enough time.

Disguised in a false beard and a change of clothes, Manning caught the jet from La Guardia. When he arrived back in his city, he went to the rented car he had waiting, and drove to the field a mile from his own plant. He made sure he wasn't followed. The field was deserted. He waited in hiding for precisely an hour to be sure that he was unobserved, then he climbed down into the gully.

Ten feet from where he had buried the suitcase of money, he stopped. He saw the mound of dirt in the dark night. He walked slowly to the gaping hole. There was no need to run.

Manning stood in the night, and looked down at the empty hole in the ground. He bent, and touched the hole and the mound of dirt beside it. It was all hard and dry. Leaves and blown debris lay thick at the bottom of the hole where his money had been. The money had been taken several months ago, probably the same night he had buried it. Yes, that same night; the money already dug up and gone when Manning had sat in his livingroom drinking his good Scotch and telling Eddie Berger that Eddie had no choice but to keep silent.

Manning had no doubt who had taken the money. Somehow, Eddie had guessed, had watched Manning, had followed him that evening, and had dug up the money. Stupid, duped, useless Eddie Berger had stolen Warren Manning's quarter of a million dollars!

Eddie and Grace Berger lay in the sun and looked out at the blue sea that surrounded the plush island hotel. Waiters hovered alertly to bring whatever they might want. Grace smiled at the little safe-cracker. "Over three months, Ed-

die. I guess we've really done it."

"Were you worried, honey? No problems, once the cops'd talked to me and let me go, and once the money was safely down here. No sweat at all."

Grace watched a sleek sailing yacht out on the blue water. "I was worried when you went through with cracking the vault in Manning's office. We had the money by then. Why did you have to do the burglary?"

"The safe had to be broken open," Eddie said. "Only Manning and Coles had the combination. If the safe wasn't busted into, Manning had to be guilty. He'd have been caught, and he'd have talked. He wouldn't have had any reason not to tell about me. Besides, he had to find the vault cracked when he got back, or he wouldn't have given the cops that false description I needed."

"Are you sure he won't tell anyway?" Grace asked.

"I'm sure," Eddie said. "He gave me no choice, that was his mistake. Prison again, or do his robbery. I'd have thought of the same double cross if I'd been him, it looked so

safe. It was easy enough to watch him close to be sure. When he came out early from the plant, I knew he had the cash. If I had to go crooked again, then I was going to get it all."

Eddie stood up in the sun. "Never corner a man with no way out, Grace. Always leave him a choice." He smiled. "Now let's take a swim, and tonight we'll go dancing again."

Together, they ran toward the warm blue sea.

Warren Manning stood in the dark and cold above the empty hole where the money had been. He could almost hear Eddie Berger.

"You got a choice, Mr. Manning," Eddie would be saying, and then Eddie would laugh.

Warren Manning could report what Eddie Berger had done, tell all about the robbery—and go to prison with Eddie; or he could say nothing, lose a quarter of a million dollars and his plan to own the company—and be safe. Prison, or let Eddie Berger get away with it all.

A choice . . .



Even with the most intricate planning, one may find the after-effects unendurable.

A CLEAR Case of Death

"Dammit, Helen, stop babying me! I can take care of myself!"

"Now, Henry, don't shout. You know you're not supposed to let yourself get excited."

"I'll get *plenty* excited if you don't stop pampering me! I'm sick and tired of it!"

"Well, just think where you'd be if you *didn't* have me around to take care of you. You'd be in a lot of trouble, Henry, I can tell you that."

"Okay, so I'll take my chances. Now, get out of here and leave me alone!"

"Oh, don't be silly, Henry. Look, I made you a nice lunch, and I want

you to clean your plate like a good boy . . ."

When the call came in at 10:26 a.m., the desk sergeant switched it through to Gavigan's office.

"Gavigan," the stocky lieutenant drawled into the phone.

by
Josh
Pachter

"Lieutenant? The sergeant said you could help me."

"Yes, sir. Your name and address, please?"

"Fredon," the voice told him. "Henry Fredon. I live at 1214 Oriole Drive."

Gavigan made a note. "And what's the problem, Mr. Fredon?"

"It's my wife," Henry Fredon explained, his voice trembling slightly. "She went into the shower about forty minutes ago, and she still hasn't come out. She has a weak heart, Lieutenant, and I—I'm afraid . . ."

Gavigan smiled. He was used to hysterical mothers whose teen-age daughters were out past their bed-times, but this shower business was a new one. "Is forty minutes a long time for your wife to stay in the shower?" he asked.

"Yes, it is. Definitely. She never showers for more than ten or fifteen minutes."

"You haven't looked in on her?"

"I can't, Lieutenant. The bathroom door's locked. I've been pounding on the door and calling her name, but she doesn't answer. What if—if something's happened?"

Gavigan picked up his pen and scrawled a triangle next to Henry Fredon's name and address. "If you're worried," he suggested, drawing a circle around the triangle, "why don't you break

down the bathroom door and check on her? That's all I'd be able to do anyway."

"I *can't*," Fredon insisted. "I'm confined to a wheelchair, Lieutenant. I haven't got the strength or the leverage."

Gavigan threw down his pen. Great! Just when it looked like it was going to be an easy shift! "All right, Mr. Fredon," he sighed. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Gavigan punched the doorbell and heard chimes sound inside the house. Almost immediately, the door swung open and Henry Fredon looked up at him with wild eyes and said, "Come in, Lieutenant. Hurry!"

Fredon was small, Gavigan saw, but sitting in the oversized metal chair he looked no bigger than a child; a child with graying hair, a strained face and an anxious twitch at the corner of his mouth; a frightened child, almost sick with worry.

"She's still in there," Fredon told him. "It's over an hour now."

"Where's the bathroom?" Gavigan asked.

"Down the hall." Fredon twisted the rubber grips attached to the wheels of his wheelchair, and the chair swung around surprisingly quickly and moved forward.

The chair stopped just past a closed door. Gavigan could hear the

sound of rushing water from inside. Automatically he tried the door-knob, but it wouldn't turn.

"Break it down," Fredon commanded, the corner of his mouth jumping nervously.

"It's your door," Gavigan shrugged. He backed off, crouched, and sprang forward. His shoulder crashed against the wood, and then

he stumbled forward as the lock tore loose and the door burst open. A wave of steam rushed out and blinded him.

He fought his way through the steam, the damp heat making his face and hands clammy. Groping, he found the shower stall and slid the pebbled-glass door open. Hot mist sprayed on his jacket as he shut



off the flow of water and waited for the rest of the steam to dissipate out into the hall.

When he could see again, he bent down and grabbed the wrist of the blowsy, naked woman sprawled on the tile floor of the shower stall and searched for a pulse.

Finally he turned around. Henry Fredon was still in the hallway, his hands balled into fists and the tic at the corner of his mouth working frantically. Gavigan wondered why he hadn't come into the bathroom, and then he noticed that Fredon's wheelchair was several inches too wide to fit through the doorway.

"Oh, my God," Fredon said dully.

Gavigan stood up and slid the stall door closed.

Lieutenant Gavigan ratcheted the last sheet of the report out of his typewriter. It was a well-written report, summing up the facts of the case and drawing the inevitable conclusion concisely.

All the physical evidence pointed to Helen Fredon's having slipped and fallen while taking a shower. The coroner listed the cause of her death as heart failure brought about by a severe shock; and her personal physician, Dr. Firestone, had confirmed that Mrs. Fredon's heart had been weak, and that a fall in the shower could easily have been fatal.

The most important piece of evidence to be considered, though, was the lock on the bathroom door. It was a bolt-action lock, and could only be engaged and opened from the inside. Which meant that, since Gavigan had found the door locked, whoever had locked it must have been in the bathroom when he had broken in the door—and the only person in the bathroom had been Helen Fredon.

All things taken into account, it was the clearest case of accidental death Gavigan had ever seen, and he had said so in his report.

Three days later, the finished report still lay on his desk. He had gone down twice to turn it in, but each time had changed his mind, not sure why, knowing only that for some reason he was unsatisfied.

There was no *reason* to be unsatisfied, really. Helen Fredon had locked herself in her bathroom and had slipped in the shower on a bar of soap or something. The shock of the fall had been too much for her heart, and she had died.

It was the obvious explanation. Actually, it was the *only* explanation, because the autopsy he'd insisted on had shown that no one had drugged her to make her slip, and no one could possibly have gotten to her through that bolted door, and no one could have killed her and bolted the door behind himself,

either, because the lock could only be worked from the inside.

Anyway, the only conceivable suspect was Henry Fredon, and he especially couldn't have killed her. Even if the bathroom door had been *open*, Fredon couldn't so much as get up from his wheelchair by himself, and the chair was too wide to go through the door.

No, there was no reason to be unsatisfied, but three days after Helen Fredon had died, the report still lay on Gavigan's desk.

It was just before his alarm clock went off on the fourth morning that he gave up. It was an accidental death, that was all there was to it. There was no other explanation for the facts.

The alarm rang, and as he leaned over and turned it off he decided to hand in his report as soon as he got down to the station. Relieved, he bounded out of bed and headed for the bathroom to shower and shave.

The plumbing in Gavigan's two-room apartment was ornery, and an idea came to him while he was waiting for the water to heat. He thought about it while he was showering, and finally decided it made sense as he scraped stubble off his lathered face with a straight razor.

When he was finished, he pulled out his copy of the Yellow Pages and called up a plumber he knew

and asked a few questions. When he heard the answers he'd expected, he dressed quickly, went down to his car and drove to 1214 Oriole Drive.

No one answered his ring. After a few minutes, he tried the door. It was unlocked, and he went in.

He found Henry Fredon in the kitchen, slumped half out of his wheelchair, breathing shallowly. As he felt for Fredon's pulse, an empty pill bottle slipped from the invalid's limp fingers and shattered on the linoleum floor. Fredon's eyelids fluttered open at the noise, and his thin white lips moved soundlessly.

"Hang on," Gavigan told him, "you're going to be fine."

"Helen," Fredon whispered. "Helen."

He died ten minutes before the ambulance got there.

Gavigan pulled a detective aside and said a few words, and the two of them threaded through the knot of photographers and fingerprint men to the laundry alcove that adjoined the kitchen.

"Do me a favor, Palmore," Gavigan said, as he twisted the water temperature dial on the washing machine to *Hot*. "Give me about three minutes, and then turn this thing on. Then," he ducked back into the kitchen, "come over here and turn on the dishwasher. After that, I want you to wait thirty sec-

onds and then turn off both machines. Okay?"

The detective looked puzzled. "What's the idea?"

"Don't ask questions, Palmore. Just do what I tell you, all right?"

"Sure." The detective shrugged.

Gavigan pushed back through the crowd of people surrounding Henry Fredon's body and dashed to the bathroom where Helen Fredon had died. He chased a photographer out of the room, and then closed and bolted the door.

Opening the shower stall, he turned the hot-water tap on full blast, and then cracked open the cold. Sheets of water roared down onto the floor of the stall. Within seconds a cloud of steam was rising, and beads of moisture broke out on Gavigan's forehead and on the mirror above the sink. Gavigan rolled up one sleeve and stuck his hand into the torrent.

A minute passed, and he waited, letting the nails of hot water sting his hand; and then, suddenly, the water was freezing cold. The shock brought tears to Gavigan's eyes. Thirty seconds later, with another

shock, the water turned hot again.

Slowly, Gavigan turned off the taps. He dried his hand on a bath towel and rolled down and buttoned his sleeve. Then he went back to the kitchen and stood off to one side, looking sadly at the dead man in the wheelchair.

Why? he wondered. *Did she nag him, or mother him, or—or what? And what should I do about it? I don't have any proof, and they've got relatives, friends. Why not let them think he killed himself because he couldn't live without her? That's better than telling them the truth; that he did it because he was sorry he murdered her. What difference does it make now, anyway? He's dead, we can't punish him any more than he's punished himself.*

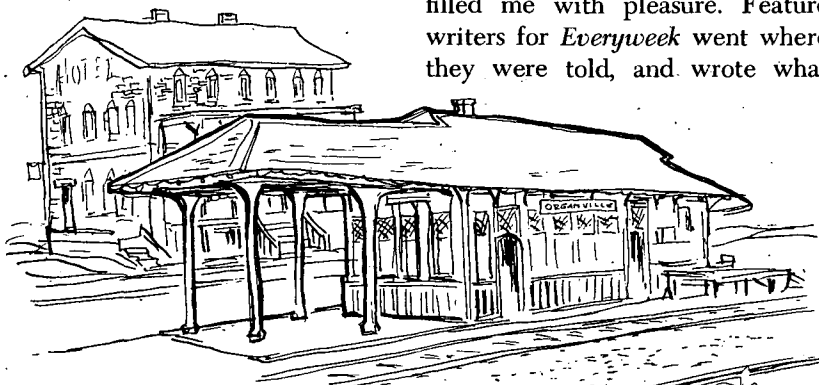
Then Gavigan's hand strayed to his jacket pocket, and he absently fingered the billfold that held his identification card and his badge.

After a while he slipped on his coat and left the house. He had a long report to write, and he'd better get started if he wanted to finish it by the end of his shift.



The nostalgia of homecoming is frequently desensitized by matters of substance.

Two Days in ORGANVILLE



Organville,” Brewster said quietly, shuffling through the papers on his desk without looking at me. “I want you to finish Herb Quick’s assignment.”

“It’s my home town,” I told him, standing uneasily before the desk like a schoolboy. “I haven’t been back there in nine years.”

He looked up, puzzled. “I know it’s your home town, Bob. That’s

why I thought of you after Herb’s accident. You know Organville, you know the people. And I think you’re ready to try a feature story.”

I knew I couldn’t refuse the assignment, even though the thought of returning to Organville hardly filled me with pleasure. Feature writers for *Everyweek* went where they were told, and wrote what

they were expected to write. “Thank you, Mr. Brewster,” I managed to say. “I appreciate the opportunity.”

“Good. You know the background pretty well. Herb Quick

went down there last week to interview this minister, Fancreek—the one who claims he’s found a hymn written by Thomas Aquinas. Somehow or other, Herb walked in front of a train and got himself killed. So the job is yours now. You can put your home town on the map.”

So it was back to Organville, which would never be on any map except maybe one of unimproved roads and uninspired places. I’d have two days there to complete my interviews with Fancreek, and then it would be back to New York in time for *Everyweek’s* Saturday noon deadline.

A train was the only way to get there, because the nearest airport was a little field fifty miles away that couldn’t handle anything bigger than a Piper Cub anyway. There were buses, but they stopped at every cow crossing and sometimes in between. The train was fairly direct, and stopped in the exact center of Organville, halfway between the drab, paint-peeled town hall and the three-story brick hotel that was still the best-looking building in town. I stood there for a while taking it all in, just thinking it had been a hell of a long time but not nearly long enough.

Then I walked across the dusty

main street to the hotel lobby. The desk clerk, a dried-up little man left over from another era, gazed long and hard at my signature. “Robert Pine. I know that name from somewhere.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re from New York, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“I know that name from somewhere.”

“Which room?”

“Huh? Seventeen. One flight up.”

“Thanks.”

“How long you be staying?” the man called after me.

“Two nights. I’ll leave Saturday morning.”

I went upstairs to the dingy hallway I still remembered, and found the room without difficulty. I’d known rooms like it before, in this very same hotel, when I’d slept off a hangover rather than go home to face the family. The wallpaper hung loose in spots, and there was a hole in the plaster above the bed. The place was falling apart, just like the town; not with a roar but with a crumbling, ever-present whimper.

I changed into a clean shirt and went downstairs for something to eat. There was a lunch counter down the block that had been a bar

fig

Edward D. Hoch

in my time, and I asked the guy behind the counter, "Whatever happened to Tiny?"

"Who?"

"Tiny. Used to have a bar here."

"That was seven, eight years ago. Where you been, mister?"

"Away."

"Tiny's got a gas station now, over on Summit Street. The cops closed him up."

"How come?"

"Crown and that newspaper of his. He kept yelling about Tiny serving minors, until finally the cops had to do something."

"How is Crown, anyway? I used to know him."

The counterman shrugged and wiped away a greasy spot. "He's married now. Married Nancy Wegman."

"So I heard." I decided I didn't want to talk about Nancy Wegman, not even after nine years. I ate my sandwich and drank my coffee and didn't ask any more questions.

I found the town's lone taxi parked across the street, and gave the sleepy driver a dollar to take me the four short blocks to Dr. Fancreek's home. It was a nice house, typically country parsonage, complete with a sagging porch overhung with vined gingerbread and that musty odor one associated with churches. I stood on the porch trying to remember if I'd ever met

Fancreek in the days of my youth.

"Yes?" The door opened to reveal a chubby little man in clerical grays. With a beard he would have passed for Santa Claus, but he didn't have a beard and this was the wrong season anyway.

"Robert Pine from *Everyweek*, sir. I believe my editor phoned that I'd be coming."

"Certainly, certainly! You came for an interview, like the other one. Tragic accident! But I hadn't really expected you so soon." He opened the screen door for me and then went bustling about, picking up scattered magazines and newspapers. "Marie, that New York reporter is here!"

This information brought forth a handsome woman not yet forty. She was a good ten years younger than her husband, and I wondered if, like army officers, ministers tended to marry later in life, after the first wave of travel and transfer had subsided. "Pleased to meet you," she said, sounding as if she meant it. "Would you like some coffee?"

"That would be very nice. Thank you."

Dr. Fancreek had seated himself beneath a garish lithograph of Christ preaching, and he faced me with folded hands and an expression of divine judgment. Maybe he thought I was going to take his photograph.

"We have some pictures of you," I said, hoping to relax him. "I just want the facts about this manuscript you discovered."

Dr. Fancreek smiled. "A composition for the organ in the handwriting of Thomas Aquinas. Or so I believe."

"You're an organologist?" I asked, getting out my notebook and hoping that was the right word.

Marie Fancreek served the coffee and then vanished on some mission of her own, perhaps to dust the maze of vases and plain junk that seemed to clutter every visible corner of the house. Fancreek watched her go and then repeated, "Organologist? I suppose so. That's the reason I moved to Organville, you know. The only place in the country where the main occupation is still the manufacture of organs. I came here a few years ago from Florida. I hate your Northern winters, but the Southern temper is conducive to the practice of religion these days."

My pencil was busy making marks across the bleakness of the notebook, and I was already sorry I hadn't brought the tape recorder along. It was back at the hotel, in my suitcase, and I'd have to remember it tomorrow. For more than an hour I listened to the story of Fancreek's days as a struggling divinity student, when he watched his father

play the organ in a crumbling Southern church that was finally torn down for a new highway. I heard of his early struggles, and of his journeys to Europe in quest of long-lost organ compositions. There were searches in musty monasteries, countless dead-end failures, and only a few successes to keep him going.

Finally, he led me upstairs, to a den that might once have served as a spare bedroom. Papers, documents and manuscripts were laid before me, disgorged from an antique safe that might have been nearly as ancient as some of its contents. For the next ten minutes I heard a detailed discourse on the Gregorian chant, followed by a maze of information on organs.

"The pipes of Pan himself were probably its beginning," Fancreek said, gesturing with his hands as if giving a sermon. "There was actually a hydraulis or water organ in use some two hundred years before Christ."

"Interesting," I admitted. "I always thought the organ was an invention of the Renaissance period."

"Hardly. Jerusalem had an organ in 400 A.D. that could be heard a mile away and needed several people to play it. For a time, organs were banned from the churches, but by the Tenth Century there was one with 400 pipes in Winchester,

England, believe it or not," he said.

"What about this composition by Thomas Aquinas?" I asked, trying finally to get down to the point.

"Here." He brought forth the final treasure, carefully framed in glass. It was a sheet of brown and crumbling parchment, covered with unfamiliar Latin and strange musical notations. "I located this almost a year ago in Italy," he announced proudly, "but it wasn't until recently that I was able to prove its authenticity."

"And just how did you do that?"

"This Latin. It reads: *Put down this fourth day after the Feast of the Holy Trinity in the year of Our Lord 1265 by Thomas son of Landolfo student of Albert.*"

"That would be Thomas Aquinas?"

Dr. Fancreek nodded. "Without doubt. His father was Count Landolfo of Aquino, and in Paris he studied under Albert the Great. Even the year seems a logical one. In 1265 he'd just completed his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, but hadn't yet started the *Summa Theologica*. He chose that time to turn to the relative lightness of an organ composition."

"What does it sound like?"

"Actually, it's a beautiful hymn, a bit like *Silent Night*. It would be a lovely piece of music even without Thomas' signature."

"And it's really very valuable?"

"Priceless! Like finding a new play by Shakespeare! The organ company here has already offered me one hundred thousand dollars for it."

"And you've accepted?"

"I haven't yet decided. It's not clear what they'd use it for. This treasure deserves a better fate than to end up illustrating an advertising campaign."

"Is it wise to keep it here, in that old safe?"

The minister stroked the glass with loving care. "I hated to part with it. But now, with all the publicity, I will need to store it in a safe-deposit box, I suppose."

"It would be best. A lot of men would commit murder for something like that." Then, for some reason, a startling unwanted thought crossed my mind. "Did Herb Quick see it? Before he died?"

Fancreek seemed to think about his answer for a moment. "Yes. In fact, he was on his way from my house the other night, when the train hit him."

"How could that have happened? People don't walk in front of trains."

Fancreek cleared his throat. "I'd rather not talk about it. Do you have any further questions?" He asked the question over his shoulder, as he went about the task of

storing his treasures back in the ancient safe.

"Not today. But perhaps I could return tomorrow with my tape recorder. Maybe we could even go over to your church and make a recording of this hymn."

Fancreek nodded, the simple smile returning to his face. "Certainly. I would be pleased to play it for you."

We went downstairs and I said good-bye to Marie Fancreek. It wasn't far back to the hotel, so I walked, perhaps along the route Herb Quick had taken less than a week before. I should have been pleased with the way things were going, but I wasn't. Something was bothering me. I couldn't quite decide whether it was just being back in Organville after so many years, or something more—something to do with Herb Quick's death.

Back at the hotel the desk clerk told me, "You got a visitor. She's waiting in the bar."

I went cold the moment I heard the words. The past was dead, damn it, and she didn't have the right to try and awaken it. I lit a cigarette to steady my nerves and went through the palm-draped archway to the dim little bar. On Saturday nights it had always been the best pickup spot in the county.

"Hello, Nancy," I said quietly, taking the stool next to hers.

Nancy Crown—Nancy Wegman the last time I'd seen her—turned and looked full at me. The sight of her again after nine years chilled my stomach and weakened my legs. I wasn't over her, and maybe I never would be. "Hello, Bob. How are you?"

"Fine. Older, I guess. How'd you hear I was in town?"

"My husband owns the newspaper, remember? We hear things."

"I heard you were married. Belated congratulations and such." I signaled the bartender for a drink, deciding I was going to need one. "I see you're still drinking whiskey sours."

"I haven't changed much, Bob." Then her eyes closed to mere slits against the cigarette smoke. "Why did you come back?"

"I'm a writer for *Everyweek*, finishing Herb Quick's assignment."

"What do you think of the town?"

"Tiny's place is gone. I was sorry to see that; it was always the best bar around."

"There are still a few roadhouses. Are you married, Bob?"

"No."

She avoided my eyes. "I got tired of waiting for you to send for me."

"So I gathered."

"I got tired of a lot of things, Bob. Being poor, for one."

She was wearing a dress that



must have cost a couple of hundred bucks back in New York. I wondered if anybody but her husband even noticed it in Organville. Avoiding her eyes, I concentrated on the damp rings scattered across the bar top. "I've been lonely for nine years, Nancy," I told her.

"I was lonely, too."

"Until John Crown came along."

She downed her drink quickly. "Forget it. I should never have come here."

"Why did you come?" I asked.

"Just to see me again?"

"To see what you were up to."

We're all very proud of Dr. Fancreek's work. It's important to us, just as the organ company is important."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She took a deep breath. "Are you investigating Quick's death?"

I lit another cigarette to cover the whirl of my brain. "I'm interested in how he died," I answered carefully.

"Don't be, Bob." She seemed sorry as soon as she'd spoken.

I laid down some money for two more drinks. "I'd like to talk with

you and John before I go back.

Could I come over tomorrow night? I'm leaving Saturday."

"I suppose so," she said; and then, "Forget what I said about Quick."

"Sure."

"We'll be looking for you around eight."

We finished our drinks and I walked her to the street. It was easy to leave her there, to watch her walking off in the twilight like a stranger. After nine years, maybe she was a stranger.

The library was still open, and I dug out the issue of John Crown's newspaper that told about the accidental death of Herb Quick. He'd been walking, apparently on his way back to the hotel from Fan-creek's house. He'd stopped at a gas station near the railroad tracks to make a long-distance call, and then gone outside to his death. Nobody had seen it happen. There was a picture of the gas station owner in the paper, pointing toward the railroad tracks. It was my old friend Tiny.

I walked through the cool evening air to Summit Street, where a glowing orange oval beckoned me to Tiny's gas station. Darkness had come quickly to the town, as it always did in my youth, and I was reminded of the many times I'd run down this very street, hurrying to

be home before the line of glowing street lights were turned on by some invisible hand.

"Hello, Tiny."

The big man turned from his half-hearted polishing of the chrome gasoline pump and eyed me suspiciously. He still had that eternal look of a bartender sizing up a college kid's age, and perhaps he thought I was one of the cops who'd run him out of business. "I remember you," he said finally, but the tone of voice told me he really didn't.

"Bob Pine. I used to come into your bar."

"Pine. Long time ago." He scratched his balding dome.

"A long time."

He frowned at me across a rack of shiny oil cans. "You used to go with the Wegman girl, and then you went off to New York to be a writer. I remember now." The orange light from the overhead sign was doing odd things to the flabby flesh of his face. "What you doing back here?"

"I worked with Herb Quick, the fellow who was killed."

The face seemed to be remembering something else now. "I don't know anything about that."

"The paper said he stopped here just before he was killed. You told the police he made a long-distance call."

"You trying to get me closed up? Trying to get the police after me here, too?" He was a frightened man.

"How did you know he was calling long distance?"

"He asked me for a flock of quarters."

"Where did he call?"

"I don't know. New York someplace, I guess."

I reached a quick decision. "Can I use your phone?"

"If you got a dime."

"I got a dime."

I went into the brightly lit office that smelled of gasoline and grease, and called the office of *Everyweek*. It was after seven, but I knew Brewster often worked late on Thursday and Friday nights.

"How are you doing out there, Bob?" His voice greeted me almost immediately, as if I'd been calling at ten in the morning.

I glanced around at Tiny hovering in the doorway. "Fine, I guess."

"Did you see the Aquinas thing?"

"Yeah. It seems authentic, but look, I think I'm onto something else."

"What's that?"

"Did Herb phone you last week, just before he was killed?"

"No. I didn't hear a word from him after he left New York."

"Well, he phoned somebody."

"Probably his wife or his girlfriend."

"From a gas station? Whoever he called, I don't think he wanted to phone from the hotel."

"What are you getting at, Bob?"

"He was killed by the train right after he made the call."

"So?"

I stared right at Tiny. "Maybe somebody gave him a push."

Brewster crackled on the other end. "What in hell have you been drinking, huh?"

"I'll see you Saturday noon," I told him, and hung up.

On the way out I passed a silent Tiny who was just dropping a dime into the soft-drink machine. He didn't ask me to join him.

I spent Friday morning with Dr. Fancreek and his wife, taking more notes, asking questions, and occasionally turning on the tape recorder to preserve some special bit of dialogue.

"Will you play the Aquinas thing for me?" I asked him.

"I'll be at the church this afternoon between four and five. We could do it then if you want to tape it," he said.

"Fine."

Marie Fancreek hovered at my elbow. "Will you be staying for lunch?"

"Thanks, but I don't think so."

Somehow the crowded corners of

the place did not seem conducive to a pleasant meal. "The story's fairly complete. I just want to get a recording of the hymn itself and then I'll be on my way back to New York."

Fancreek smiled slightly. "Even with the recording, how will you ever convey the joy of this music to your readers? There are limitations to the printed page, you know."

"That's not my problem," I told him. "I'm just doing the background article. We have a music editor who'll listen to the tape and make his own comments on the composition."

"He should have come with you."

"Aarons? He never leaves Manhattan. Besides, he's not really on the staff of *Everyweek*. He's a professor at Columbia . . ." I stopped speaking as a sudden thought hit me. Herb Quick had phoned someone in New York before he died. Why not Aarons?

"What's the matter?" Fancreek asked.

"Nothing. I just remembered something I have to do. I must be going now, really."

"You'll be at the church at four?"

"I'll be there," I told him.

I left them, with a nod to Marie Fancreek, and walked slowly down the sunny street with the briefcase and tape recorder bobbing against

my leg as I pondered Herb's call.

Aarons. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that Herb Quick had phoned Professor Aarons from Tiny's gas station. He phoned him from the gas station rather than the hotel, and . . . And what?

I put through a call to Columbia and asked to speak to Aarons, but he was in class, and would be until later that afternoon. I was at a dead end for the moment, so I decided to visit John Crown at his office a little in advance of our scheduled talk:

John Crow Crown liked to think of himself as one of the nation's youngest newspaper publishers, and he probably was. *The Organville Herald*, only recently promoted to a daily status, would never win any awards or make much money, but in a town this size its word was law and its publisher was God. I'd known him slightly in the old days, when his father was still alive and running things. I hadn't liked him then and I didn't like him any better now.

"I thought Nancy said you were coming to the house this evening," he said by way of greeting.

I stared into the pale-blue eyes and took in the square jaw and youngish face of Nancy's husband. "I wanted to talk to you before that," I said.

"About Nancy?"

"About Dr. Fancreek. And Herb Quick."

"Quick? The reporter who died?"

"That's right."

"I was sorry about that."

"What's your opinion of Fancreek?"

"My opinion? He's going to put Organville on the map, that's my opinion."

"Is that so important to you?"

"It's important to the town. The organ company is still our largest employer."

"And you own part of it."

"That's no secret." He looked at me distastefully. "A few years in New York and you think you're pretty good, don't you?"

"No."

"Why did you come back?"

"I'll give you the sort of answer you want: to seduce Nancy. Now are you happy?"

The pale eyes were like ice. "You'd better go."

I got up and started for the door. "Am I still invited tonight? Or don't you trust me in her company?"

He turned away. "You're still invited," he mumbled. "I'm sure she has no further interest in someone of your—"

I closed the door on his last word and went down in the little elevator to the street. I felt good, and for the first time I wasn't sorry to be back

in Organville—not in the slightest.

I spent twenty minutes on the phone with Professor Aarons, and it was well worth it. Yes, his deep, familiar voice assured me, Herb Quick had phoned him one evening last week. He hadn't heard about Herb's death for a couple of days, and he'd never connected the two events in his mind. There had been no reason to tell Brewster about the call, because he naturally assumed that Herb had lived long enough to tell him.

I went over the conversation with Herb Quick, as he remembered it, and then read him my own notes, just to make sure we were correct. Finally, I thanked him and hung up. On the way through the lobby, I stopped at the desk and told the clerk, "I was speaking to Professor Aarons at Columbia, in case you're reporting it to Crown."

He gave me a dirty look and didn't answer.

I reached Dr. Fancreek's church just a few minutes after four. It was dim and dreary without the overhead lights or candles, but the sounds of the great organ boomed out from above, warming the place with a cresting wave of melodic vibration. In the hands of Dr. Fancreek, the organ became almost a thing alive, a creature of substance that we mortals could never hope



to duplicate. I strode over to him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Pine," he said, his face lit by a single small reading bulb behind the wide keyboard. "I'm playing the Aquinas composition. How does it sound?"

"I don't know. I suppose I wasn't really listening."

"What?"

"Could you stop playing now?"

"You didn't even bring your tape recorder."

"Nō. Could you stop playing?" I was almost shouting above the roar.

He lifted his hands from the keyboard and adjusted the valves and switches. "Now, what is it?"

"I have some bad news."

"What bad news, Mr. Pine?"

"I've been talking to an expert.

It's most improbable that Thomas Aquinas ever wrote that music."

"Oh?" His face was dim in the light, and I couldn't really make out his reaction.

"The inscription—the basis of your evidence—says it was written on the fourth day after the Feast of the Holy Trinity; the fourth day after Trinity Sunday. In the Catholic Church's year, that Thursday was until recently the Feast of Corpus Christi."

"Oh?" Again, only that single sound.

"Of all the people in the world, Thomas Aquinas was most likely to have remembered that feast in the year 1265. Because just a year earlier, in 1264, Pope Urban IV extended the feast to the general calendar of the church, and invited Thomas Aquinas to supply the texts for it. Certainly Thomas would have remembered such an occasion just a year later. Certainly Thomas, of all people, would have called that day the Feast of Corpus Christi."

If I'd expected the news to startle or crush him, it did neither. He sat very still and thoughtful, and then turning toward me, asked, "Will you write the story anyway? It's such a beautiful hymn."

In that moment I knew. The information wasn't a surprise to him. He'd known all along that the thing

wasn't authentic. He'd known all along and then Herb Quick had found out too.

A few hours later, in the Crown livingroom, I sat sipping my drink and feeling very sure of myself. Nancy was there, brash and beautiful as ever, wearing a sleek lounging gown designed more for Sutton Place than for the wilds of Organville. She stood tall and magnificent next to her husband's chair, with her reassuring hand resting lightly on his shoulder. I was the enemy now, but I didn't particularly care.

"The thing's a fake," I told them, pleased with the effect of my words.

"Say that again," Crown said, the frown deepening across his brow.

"I said the Aquinas thing's a fake, and you know it. So does Fancreek. I talked to him this afternoon."

John Crown stood up. "You believe Dr. Fancreek would perpetrate a hoax?"

"Sometimes, when a man has devoted most of his life to something, he's unwilling to admit the obvious. Fancreek chose to believe what he wanted to believe. Call it a hoax if you want, but the perpetrator was probably some 14th Century monk."

"Then you won't write your story for *Everyweek*?" Nancy asked.

"I'll write my story," I said, "but it'll be about Herb Quick, who

found out about the hoax and died with the knowledge. People don't walk in front of trains these days, not people like Herb. I think he was pushed."

"By whom?" John Crown asked quietly.

"Well, Herb and I both figured out that the hotel desk clerk reports to you. That's why Herb used the phone at Tiny's gas station to check on the authenticity of the hymn. I suppose Tiny reports to you too. He tipped you off, and you were waiting for Herb. When you found you couldn't bribe him, you pushed him in front of that train."

"You're mad!" Crown said, his voice barely a whisper. "I suspected it this afternoon, but I'm sure of it now. Print that story in your magazine and I'll sue you for a million dollars."

There was nothing to be gained by talking to them, nothing but a sort of sadistic pleasure at their alarm. Did I really hate Crown that much? Did I hate him because of what he was or only because of Nancy?

"Bob . . ." She came to me now, her arm outstretched in pleading.

"You suspected it all along, didn't you, Nancy? That's why you came to the hotel yesterday to see me."

"You went to his hotel?" Crown said, hardly believing the words as he spoke them.

"I went. But only to talk to him."

"Do you think I killed that reporter?"

She turned to him with uncertain eyes. "I . . . don't know, John."

I downed the rest of my drink and decided it was time to go; time to leave Organville forever.

The lights of the main street reflected off the walls of my darkened hotel room, bringing back fleeting memories of days and dreams long gone; a parent dead, a home left behind, a life opening before me. Organville had been only a phase, an incubation, and I'd been wrong to think of it as more than that. My story was written—the story of Fancreek and Crown and Nancy, and Herb Quick—but it was a story I could never publish.

I'd had my moment of glory, my moment of accusation, but now in the cold neon of nighttime I already knew what the light of day would show me. My so-called evidence against John Crown was based on nothing but a guess that Tiny had warned Crown about Herb Quick's phone call to New York. But of all the people in Organville, Tiny was perhaps the least likely to be in Crown's pay. He would certainly do no favors for the man whose newspaper had closed down his bar and forced him into the gasoline business.

I was as false as my accusation, and my story could never be published.

The bedside phone gave a jingle, and I heard the desk clerk's familiar voice. "Lady down here to see you." There was just a bit of a leer to the words. It was almost midnight.

"Send her up."

Nancy Crown had come to pay one last visit, perhaps to bargain her body for her husband's honor. I could tell her it was all a lie, that there would be no story for *Every-week*, that Herb Quick's death had been an accident after all. But I knew I would keep silent at the beginning, because I still loved her and wanted her and needed her—Nancy.

Not Organville, only Nancy; and that was why I'd come back.

I opened the door to her knock, but it was not Nancy. It was another woman, from another life. It was Marie Fancreek.

She smoked cigarettes and stood by the window and talked. She talked without pausing for nearly an hour, with the neon from the

movie marquee finally going dark on her face.

"I knew all about it," she said at last, "but when you've lived with a man, when a man and his work are your whole life, you can see his dream. I came to believe in the Aquinas manuscript just as he did, even though we both knew we were living a lie. I followed Herb Quick out of the house that night, and watched him make his phone call. I was waiting when he came out of the gas station, and he saw me and told me what he'd do. He told me he'd ruin my husband, expose him as a shabby fraud. He didn't understand how it was, how it could be after all those years of patient labor."

"So you pushed him in front of the train."

"The train came, and perhaps I pushed him. It's hard to remember now."

I thought about what I'd tell Brewster, waiting back in New York. I thought about a lot of things, but mostly I only thought about leaving Organville in the morning, and never coming back.



The one having the metal is not necessarily the winner.



by
Dan J. Marlowe

Red-faced and perspiring, FBI agent Hugh Casey paused in the midst of the staccato instructions he was issuing into the telephone cradled between his neck and shoulder. He held a walkie-talkie in his left hand. "Loomis!" he called sharply. "Who's in the truck that just pulled up outside?"

Carl Loomis, airport manager,

looked up from the technical manual through which he was rapidly thumbing. He stared at the green-and-white panel truck visible through the window of his cluttered office. Wire mesh showed in the glass of the truck's rear doors. Beyond the vehicle, heat waves shimmered from the portion of concrete runway that could be seen.

GROUNDING

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"That's Jed Thompson," Loomis answered. "He's come to pick up my dog." He glanced at a friendly-looking German shepherd on the floor behind his desk. "He trains 'em."

"Get rid of him," Casey ordered, then resumed his interrupted phone conversation. "After you've listed the serial numbers, Bascomb, I want the bills roughed up and re-strapped so they don't look like new, got it? And hurry it up!" He banged down the phone.

It had probably been many a long year since bank president Web Bascomb had been addressed so peremptorily, Carl Loomis thought with amusement that failed to dissipate his tension.

Billowing August heat preceded Jed Thompson into the high humidity created by the office's hard-working air-conditioner. The man was lean and weather-beaten, mahogany-colored from a lifetime in the sun.

Carl Loomis opened his mouth to speak, then closed it as the door opened again and a fat boy in a white uniform came in carrying a case of soft drinks and a large bag of waxed-paper-wrapped sandwiches. "Whatcha gonna do with all the stuff, Carl?" the boy asked, glancing curiously around the office.

"Eat it," Carl said. "Out!" He

waited until the boy had left. "Jed," he began, then turned his head as a black box on his desk spoke brusquely.

"Y'all hear me?" the box said. The voice was low but menacing. "Do I got t' kill one of these people before y' believe me?"

Casey hurried to the desk and depressed a button on the box. "The food's coming right now and the money's on the way," he said hurriedly.

"It'd better be," the deadly-sounding voice warned. "An' there better be no funnin' around."

"The food's coming," Casey repeated. He gestured at Carl. "Get your car, Loomis."

Carl started for the door. Through the window he could see the plane parked at the distant end of the north runway.

"You want the food out at the plane?" Jed Thompson asked unexpectedly. "I'll drive it out there. Seems like you two got enough to do right here."

"I don't think that's a good—" Carl Loomis started to say.

"Go ahead, Thompson," Casey interrupted him. "Leave the food on the plane's ramp steps, then drive out to the highway."

Jed Thompson picked up the bag of sandwiches and case of soft drinks and left the office.

"You shouldn't have done that,"

Carl said soberly "You know—"

"He's right that neither of us should leave here," Casey said impatiently. He began issuing detailed instructions into the walkie-talkie in his left hand.

"You don't understand," Carl continued. "Jed's wife died of a heart attack two days after she got back here on a plane that was hijacked to Cuba. He was a little too willin' to take that food out there."

Casey paused in the act of reaching for the black box which the technician had set up to permit two-way conversation between the plane's cockpit and the airport manager's office. "Get your car!" he snapped at Carl.

Loomis gunned the automobile across the deserted-looking airport. The tower had diverted all air traffic. The green-and-white truck was parked twenty feet from the plane, its door open. "There he is!" Casey barked. "Park between the truck and the plane!"

Thompson's lean figure was on the wheeled ramp leading to the plane's cabin door. He placed his burden on the top step, then backed

down, in plain sight of anyone inside the plane. The cabin door opened, and a hand holding a machine pistol reached out and groped for the food.

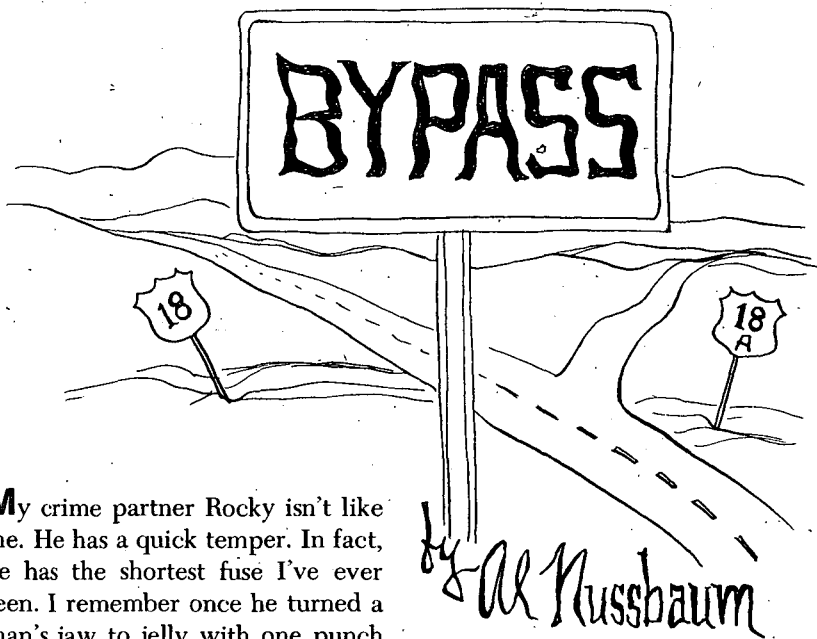
Jed Thompson whistled shrilly. Three dogs leaped through the open door of the truck and flowed sinuously up the ramp steps. They disappeared inside the partly-opened plane door.

A hoarse scream sounded as Carl braked to a skidding halt. The cabin door burst open, and a man staggered out. A dog was draped around his shoulders, snapping at his neck. Another hung from a thigh, fangs imbedded. The man lost his balance and fell down the ramp. The machine pistol flew from his hand as he disappeared under a wave of slavering, slashing dogs.

"Ol' Jed, he trains killer dogs," Carl Loomis heard himself saying numbly, as the dogs sorted themselves out from the ragged-looking thing on the concrete and, red-muzzled, jumped back into the green-and-white truck. "When he turns 'em loose, they'll take down anyone carryin' metal in his hand."



To the many hazards on our nation's highways, perhaps a new one has been added.



My crime partner Rocky isn't like me. He has a quick temper. In fact, he has the shortest fuse I've ever seen. I remember once he turned a man's jaw to jelly with one punch because he thought the guy was staring at him on the street.

Then there's the time we'd stopped at a bar to make a phone call. A brawl broke out, and someone threw a bottle. It smashed against the side of Rocky's head. Rocky went clean out of his mind. Blood was gushing from a two-inch cut above his ear, running down his face and soaking into the collar of

his shirt, but he didn't even notice. He went from one man to another and snatched them off their feet. He shook them like rag dolls till their teeth chattered. "Did you throw that bottle?" he demanded, then threw them aside like so many sacks of garbage before they could say anything.

His rage hadn't lasted long—no more than five minutes, at most—

and it left as quickly as it had arrived, but by then the fight was over. Everyone was gazing in awe at Rocky, not daring to move a muscle for fear he'd turn his attention on them. The purple color slowly drained from his face and neck, and he went back to looking like a soft, slightly overweight shoe clerk.

Only then did he notice I was hanging from his shoulders like an opera cape. I'd been shouting into his ear, trying to calm him down, but it had been like trying to put out a forest fire with an eyedropper. For all the attention he'd paid to me, he might have been deaf, and I might have been invisible.

He shook his head to clear it and sprayed blood on me. "Sorry about this, Tony," he said in his normal mild tone. "I lost my head."

I grabbed a clean towel from the bar and handed it to him. "Wrap this around your skull." Then I threw some bills onto the bar and hustled him out of there before the police arrived. They'd have been certain to ask more questions than we could answer.

Rocky and I make a good team. We're opposites. When his temper gets him into trouble, I always bail him out of it. In exchange, he provides the muscle and brawn for my schemes.

Not that I'm always calm, cool

and collected. Fact is, I can get every bit as angry as Rocky does, but it takes me hours of brooding before I reach the wild pitch he achieves in seconds. By then, it's usually too late for me to do anything about the cause of my anger.

Now, Rocky and I were bent over a table in our New York apartment looking at the floor plan of a small Miami bank. It had the makings of a good two-man caper and had been referred to us by a "business" associate. There was just one guard, and there were only half a dozen other employees, including the manager. Add to this the fact that it was in the middle of a rich shopping center, and you can get a picture of the plum we planned to pluck.

I folded the floor plan and put it into my inside pocket.

Rocky walked over to the couch and sat down. As was his habit, he shifted some heavy artillery from a belt holster to the shoulder rig that nestled under his arm. Rocky always carried two big .45 automatics and wore three holsters, two on his belt and one under his left arm. A shoulder holster is easiest to reach from a sitting position, so he always slipped one of his weapons beneath his left arm whenever he sat down. He always had at least one weapon near at hand no matter what position he was in.

"When do we leave?" he wanted to know.

"We don't," I answered. "I'll drive down first and look things over. There's a lot of heat on us since the Ohio job, and Florida is fresh territory. We'll split up long enough for me to check out the bank. You wait here till I give you a call to come down. This'll give us a chance to cool off without some cop stumbling over us. You just stay out of trouble while I'm gone."

"Sure," he agreed with a meekness that never failed to amaze me. Rocky was a walking arsenal who could have ripped my arms off without half trying, but he took orders from me like a ten-year-old.

I left a couple of hours later, after I packed my pistol in the bottom of my suitcase and locked the case in the trunk of my heavy sedan. A big car like mine was a real headache in the city, but it made up for it on the road. Its ride was smooth, and it had the speed and handling characteristics you don't get with a compact.

I followed U.S. 1 until I was past Washington, D.C. and deep into Virginia. Then I shifted to less-traveled, secondary roads. I was able to maintain my brisk pace, and there was less chance of running into a safety inspection. I didn't want to take the chance of having some hick state policeman recognize me

while he was checking to see if my horn and brakes were working.

By noon of my second day on the road I was deep into Georgia, heading south on Route 18. I had gone over 200 miles since my last stop, and I was searching the left side of the road for a likely-looking truck stop. I always choose truck stops on the left side of the road. That way, while the car's being serviced and I'm getting a bite to eat, I can pick up some information about the road I'll be traveling from people who've just gone over it.

When I finally spotted Irwin's Truck Stop, my engine had to have been sucking the last fumes from my gas tank. Irwin's didn't look like much. The paint was faded and flaking from both the buildings and signs, and only one truck was parked by the diesel fuel pump.

I didn't have much choice, though, so I swung onto the gray stone that had been spread in front of the place and skidded to a stop beside the high-test pumps. A kid in jeans came running up and I told him to fill the tank and check under the hood. Then I went into the diner.

There was just one waitress behind the long counter, a plain, dark-haired girl in her early twenties. The only other customer, a seedy-looking guy in a beat-up leather jacket, had to be the driver of the

truck I'd seen outside. He was straddling a stool opposite the jukebox and beating time to the music on the counter. Simultaneously, he directed a steady stream of patter at the waitress.

The girl broke away from him and came to me with a smile that was half friendliness and half gratitude for the excuse to get away from the trucker.

I told the girl what I wanted, and she hurried away to prepare it. Next thing I knew the truck driver had dropped onto the seat beside me.

He was one of the pushy, obnoxious types I dislike on sight, and I guess my expression must have shown how I felt. I'm no actor—that's why I make a better bandit than a conman.

He looked disconcerted for a second, then demanded, "What'sa matter, fella? Smell somethin' bad?"

The last thing I wanted was trouble with some idiot trucker. I tapped the side of my jaw. "Toothache," I said. "I've got a toothache."

I don't know what follow-up he had planned, but that stopped it. He didn't believe my toothache story, but he didn't feel like pushing anything.

To change the subject, I asked, "You heading north?"

"Yeah, why?" He gave me a narrow-eyed, suspicious stare. If Rocky had been there he'd have gouged out one of his eyes.

"What's the road like south of here? That's where I'm headed. Any construction or other hazards?"

It took him a while to answer, then he shrugged and smiled. "No construction to speak of. A bunch o' speed traps, though. Tell ya what—swing right onto 18A about three miles south o' here—it rejoins Route 18 a few miles north o' Valdosta. You'll avoid all the speed traps."

"Thanks for the tip," I said. "I'll do that."

Once behind the wheel again, I looked for the turnoff he'd mentioned and found it right where he said it would be. I pulled onto the shoulder of the road and stopped long enough to consult my road map. It showed 18A and 18 merging again just north of Valdosta. Until then I had half-suspected the trucker was steering me into a swamp or something. That's the curse of having a suspicious nature.

I put the car in gear and followed 18A. The alternate was as well maintained as the main route, and there were even fewer cars. If anything, I figured I'd make better time taking the detour than I would have made by sticking with the main road.

That's when I saw the school bus that was pulled off to one side. Its yellow body had a square silhouette, and the words SCHOOL BUS in black letters were flanked by flashing red lights. I pulled to a stop thirty feet behind the bus and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited . . .

The bus didn't move. Finally, I got tired of sitting there. I got out and walked up to the bus. The door was open wide, and there was no one aboard. Its engine wasn't running. I stepped inside and found that the flashing red lights were being operated from a storage battery located in the center of the wide rear seat.

I climbed back down from the bus and stood looking around. All I could see were rolling hills with a few trees and bushes. There were no houses nearby, and no side road that might have led to any. That didn't make sense. There was no reason for the bus to be there.

I walked slowly back to my car, trying to puzzle it out. I got behind the wheel again and gunned the engine. I didn't have time to waste on mysteries. As I sat there, another car came up behind me, slowed, then pulled out and passed both me and the parked bus.

That was good enough for me. I swung around the bus and drove a few hundred yards before the road

made an abrupt turn to the right around a low hill and the mystery was solved.

There was a police cruiser pulled up on the shoulder of the road, and its dome light was flashing. A khaki-uniformed man in a World War I campaign hat stood beside it. He motioned for me to pull off the road ahead of his vehicle.

I did as he directed, but I swore under my breath while I did it. That truck driver had suckered me good. Instead of guiding me around road hazards, he'd directed me to this trap. If I ever ran into that guy again I'd turn him every way but loose.

The cruiser had a gold shield with the word *Sheriff* painted on the door. As soon as I was stopped ahead of it, the cop walked toward me. He was a stocky man of medium height, somewhere in his forties. He was wearing a pair of mirror sunglasses, the kind that hide the wearer's eyes, and he looked more like he should've been selling cars on television than waiting beside a country road.

"Step outta the car, please," he said.

I pushed the door open and stepped to the ground. Just then a car came along from the same direction I had come. The cop gave it a cursory glance, but made no effort to flag it down. The car dis-



played the black-and-white local license plates while my car had orange-and-black New York tags. That seemed to be the only difference, but it was apparently enough.

"Ya know, you were speedin', boy. An' you jus' passed a stopped school bus." His face was expressionless. A nameplate over his breast pocket read *Shepley*. I could see my distorted reflection in the lenses of his sunglasses and that was all. His face was unreadable.

He pushed me a little more. "I suppose you think you wasn't speedin'," he accused.

I didn't say anything. I had no doubt, if I went back to look for it,

I'd find a sign posting some ridiculously low speed limit, hidden behind a roadside bush.

"Don't ya know it's against the law to pass a stopped school bus?" the sheriff prodded.

"Yes," I said. I didn't bother to add that it obviously applied only to out-of-state drivers.

"Well, what'd ya do it for? You've got good sense, ain't ya, boy?"

"Guess I wasn't thinking," I said and shrugged elaborately, hoping that would end it.

It didn't. He launched into a five-minute tirade about the evils of whiskey-crazed Yankee drivers—

how they kill more fine Southern children than all the diseases he could name, and he could name quite a few. Through it all I stood quietly, burning inside, but keeping myself under control.

Finally, he ran out of wind or words and paused for a second. "Climb back into your machine, boy," he ordered. "Go straight ahead till I honk my horn. Then turn right and keep a-goin' till ya come to a big yaller house. Pull into the front yard an' stop."

I started out, and he hugged my rear bumper with the cruiser all the way. Every time I slowed too much he'd come up and bang into me and angrily blow his horn.

My thoughts kept going to my pistol. Locked away in my suitcase in the trunk of the car as it was, it might as well have been back in New York with Rocky. Of course, it wasn't anger or fear of what lay ahead that made me wish for my weapon—I figured I could handle the phony traffic charge. However, there was something about the sheriff that seemed familiar. I was afraid I might have met him somewhere before. If I had, that could cause a ripple that all the false identification papers and money in the world couldn't smooth over.

When I turned in at the yellow house, Sheriff Shepley parked beside me and got out, stamping his

feet. There were half a dozen other cars in the yard, most with out-of-state license plates. If they were, like myself, customers for the justice of the peace, whose sign hung from the porch railing, the sheriff had a profitable business.

I pointed to the cars and said, "You've been busy."

"Naw, them's all kin. We're havin' a family reunion here, startin' tomorrow. It'll last a week."

"The justice of the peace is a relative?" I shouldn't have had to ask.

He smiled proudly. "Sure is. Judge Shepley. Most everyone in these parts is kin."

The screen door on the porch burst open and a boy about ten years old dashed out with another youngster at his heels. The second kid tackled the first one, and they rolled in the gravel, fighting, until the sheriff reached down and pulled them apart. One of the boys was the image of the truck driver who had given me the directions to Route 18A.

"You don't happen to have a relative who drives a truck, do you?" I asked, mentally trimming some of the weight off him.

"Why, sure, that'd be my brother Luke. He's this boy's pa." He held up one kid's arm like a fight referee, then his face clouded suddenly. "You ain't a friend of his, are you?"

That explained why the sheriff had seemed familiar. I'd subconsciously spotted the family resemblance. "We've met," I admitted, answering his question.

He carried that statement through to the logical conclusion and laughed. "Luke sure is a card. He sends a lot o' folks this way. Most of 'em is bad drivers, jus' like you."

Twenty minutes and three hundred dollars later, I was on my way again. I had been so quiet that they must have thought I was retarded. They didn't know I was fighting to keep myself from exploding. Once they saw they couldn't bait me into a string of contempt-of-court fines, they seemed to take pity on the simpleminded New Yorker. At least they left me with my traveler's checks and the title to the car. I suspected everyone didn't make out as well.

I was hot enough to fry an egg on my bare palm, and the more I thought about the Shepley clan the hotter I got. With every mile I drove, my blood pressure rose. Like I've said, I'm not quick-tempered,

but my anger builds slowly until it's every bit as awesome as my partner's.

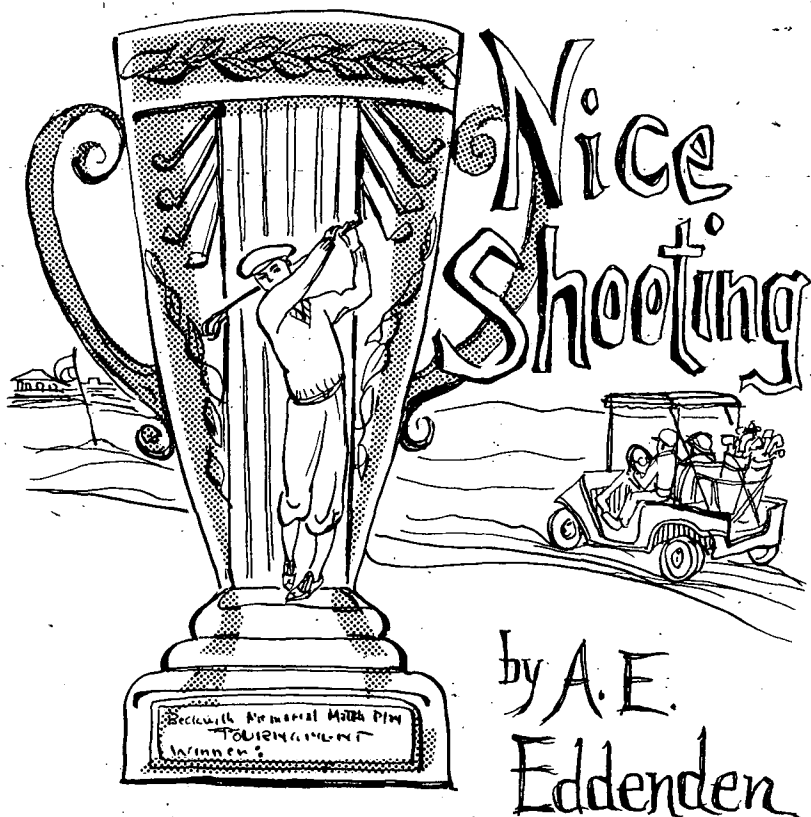
I drove straight through to Miami without a rest stop. I was too tensed up to sleep. All I could think of was the Shepley clan and the family reunion they would be having for the next week. If they'd pulled a gun on me and taken my money, I could have laughed it off. It was their honest thievery that got to me. Every time I pulled a score, I put my neck on the block, but the Shepleys never risked a thing. They held all the aces and didn't care who knew it.

When I reached Miami, I checked into a motel. I looked over the little bank the next day, and it seemed made to order for Rocky and me. I called Rocky and told him I'd arrived okay and that the bank looked good. "Come on down," I said. "And bring the Thompson submachine gun with you."

Then I told him exactly what route to take, pinpointing where to make the turn onto Route 18A so he wouldn't miss it.



To competitive golfers, there is nothing quite as satisfying as the sound of a well-hit ball.



When you first approach the Provincial Rest Home, you have the feeling you're visiting rich friends in the country—until you see the heavy mesh screens on each window. The receptionist, in her

starched white uniform, pleasantly asks you which inmate you wish to see; or rather, which guest. She is surrounded by the usual waiting-

room array of objects—magazines, uncomfortable chairs, ash trays, plastic flowers—except for one item.

On the wall near the door, a magnificent trophy rests on a specially built shelf. It has a central, fluted column, flanked by miniature, bronze golf clubs and laurel leaves, which supports a small, bronze, plus-foured golfer frozen at the top of his follow-through. At the base of the trophy is a plaque inscribed elegantly with the words: BECKWITH MEMORIAL MATCH PLAY TOURNAMENT. The space under the heading: WINNER, is provokingly blank.

It was wet and drizzly—cool for this time of year—but that didn't affect the last round of the Beckwith Memorial Match Play Tournament. The two finalists were sitting in their electric cart on the first tee. They had played this type of head-to-head competition over the last twenty-five years, always with the same result. Everett Jameson had never beaten Barney Swatz.

It didn't seem fair to Everett, or to most of the other seniors, either. The two were close in handicap but Everett was a sweet, classic swinger compared to Barney. It was Barney's mouth that won most tournaments. He was a smooth talker, a needler, a master gamesman.

In the quiet of the locker rooms, when lesser men had gone home to their families, and the old guard was relaxing in the mellow surroundings of the nineteenth hole, the Barney Swatz stories were told again and again. He was a man to be reckoned with on the links, but Everett knew it. This was a new day, a new tournament, and he was determined to win it.

Everett won the toss. He teed up his ball and drove, straight and true, into the heart of the first fairway, about two hundred yards, with approximately six feet of draw.

"Not bad for a young fella, Ev," Barney said.

Everett was younger than Barney, five months to be exact, but it didn't really matter. They were both in their mid-sixties.

Barney waggled for a full minute, made three or four practice swings and finally, when you least expected it, took his unorthodox cut at the ball. It was a good shot. A little left to right but ten yards farther than Everett's.

"Damn!" Barney said. "Hit the top half." The match was on.

One of Barney's strong points was his inept appearance when he held a golf club. His swing was enough to send a true student of the game back to the library. Because of his short, rotund body, with matching arms, he had to swing

around his large stomach, and the strange compensations he had to make in order to strike the ball squarely gave him the look of a spinning hippopotamus.

His clothes didn't help, either. A baggy, faded shirt, one or two buttons always missing, khaki shorts, a little too long, diamond knee socks that sank lower and lower with each hole he played, eventually disappearing on the eighteenth inside heavy, spiked boots; and on his blushing, hairless head, he wore a spotless, white pith helmet. When Barney played a new member, his costume, in the side-bet action, was worth an unofficial two strokes; but Everett knew this also. By the time they'd reached the eighth tee, Barney was down one.

"Ev, old buddy," Barney said, "if I was smart, I'd give you the match right now. We could go in and tell the guys and drink to your victory." He rummaged around noisily in his bag. "How about a little smash now? I brought some with me."

All this rambling, distracting monologue started with Everett's approach to his teed ball and ended with the crack of another well-hit shot down the fairway. Everett smiled to himself—he was confident of winning. So far, he had withstood all the old tricks that had lost him matches with this crafty competitor in past years. All the remarks about

his picture swing, his tasteful clothing, his thin frame and balding head had not affected his concentration on playing to win.

However, on the par three fourteenth, Barney's remarks, now harsher and cruder than ever, were beginning to poke holes in the thin veneer of Everett's good spirits. He was four up with five to play.

"C'mon, Ev," Barney said, "hurry up and hit the ball. I'm getting cold."

Everett stood up to the ball.

"Whatever you do," Barney said, "don't shank it."

Everett hit a crisp four iron on a perfect line to the green. It landed about five feet to the right of the pin, took a short hop, stopped and backed up three feet—a dream shot.

Barney said nothing. He threw his ball onto the hairy tee and, after the usual gyrations, hit a textbook shank. It squirted off to the right in a hideous, low arc and landed in the bushes that lined the edge of the short fairway. From there, he took two to reach the bunker in front of the green. He blasted out and two-putted for a six.

Everett, unable to contain his excitement, stepped up to his putt and yipped it past the hole by ten yards. He then composed himself and got down in three more blows for a five.

Everett was ecstatic. The trophy

was his. He had finally downed the great Barney Swatz, most formidable match player in the club, on the fourteenth! Wait till the guys heard. He turned for the customary handshake but Barney was already sitting in the electric cart.

"You're pretty quiet, Barney," Everett said, trying to ignore a small, worrying stab of self-doubt.

"I know you wanted to win . . ."

Barney paused.

"What do you mean, wanted to? I won."

"And I know you wanted to win fairly."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your clubs, Ev. I counted your clubs."

"Eh?"

"You've got fifteen. One over the limit."

Everett was stunned. He walked over to his bag and counted the clubs—once, twice, and a third time. Fifteen. "I don't understand . . ."

"If it was just a fun game, Ev . . ." Barney said. "But this is different. In a tournament, the PGA is quite explicit. Automatic disqualification."

"But I only *have* fourteen clubs," Everett pleaded. "Someone must've . . . maybe at the pro shop . . ."

"Ev, old buddy," Barney shrugged, "I don't make the rules. C'mon, get in."

Everett climbed into the golf cart in a state of shock. They drove to the next tee.

"Might as well play in," Barney said. "Give you a chance to pull yourself together. Hell, Ev, it's only a trophy."

Barney hit what he called a real twitcher, straight down the fairway—his best of the day—while Everett sat glumly in the cart.

"C'mon, Ev, you're up."

Everett roused himself and shuffled over to the tee where he sniped a sickening duck hook well off line. When they found his ball, it was at the base of a small bush with several branches blocking his swing.

"I've had about enough for today," Everett said. "I think I'll pick up."

"Nonsense," Barney said. "Hit the ball. It'll make you feel better. Here, I'll give you a hand."

Barney took off his ridiculous hat and knelt down to hold the interfering branches out of Everett's way. His head was about ten inches from the ball.

Everett automatically pulled a club from his bag. It felt odd—unfamiliar. He examined it—an old, scratched, rusty, one iron. The fifteenth club. It wasn't his, but something tugged at his memory.

"C'mon, Ev," Barney shouted from his awkward position. "I'm getting a cramp."

Everett, still puzzled, lined up his shot. At the start of his forward press, a series of clear, bright pictures, like an orderly slide presentation, flashed through his head: the same old one iron in the trunk of Barney's car; the one iron in Barney's grip, chipping practice balls on someone's front lawn; the one iron as a walking stick for Barney's evening strolls; and the last slide—not from memory but conjecture—Barney stuffing the one iron into Everett's bag just before the match; his insurance for winning the tournament.

"Are you going to hit the ball or aren't you?"

Everett's take-away was as smooth as ever. His downswing, a little faster than usual, caught Barney squarely on the temple with a noise that sounded surprisingly like a well-hit ball. Barney Swatz made no sound as he rolled over onto his back, gave one last, unnatural shudder and stared with unseeing eyes at the dull, overcast skies. He had played his last tournament. He was no longer a man to be reckoned with on the links or, for that matter, anywhere.

Everett experienced a strange, inward peace. He kicked his ball over the inert form of his quiet companion to a preferred lie and hit a frozen rope of a shot to the center of the green. "Not a bad

club at all, Barn," he said, smiling.

The next five minutes were spent getting Barney into the cart, and it was no easy job. Everett finally wedged Barney in, crossed his legs in a macabre but nonchalant attitude, and jammed the pith helmet back onto his head at a jaunty angle. They proceeded down the fairway, with Everett scanning the horizon. All was clear.

Everett holed out for a bird—not charging himself for moving the ball over Barney—and played the next two holes in par figures. As he hit his approach shot to the eighteenth green, a plan was taking shape in the back of his mind. He wasn't quite sure of it yet, but it had something to do with the big hill behind the clubhouse. If he could make it to there with nobody seeing him, he could turn the cart over at a spot he had in mind. He could jump out—maybe say Barney was driving—and then the cart would roll down the steep hill, through the hardy sumacs and, with a little luck, Barney would end up in the rock garden with the alyssum and portulaca.

At the eighteenth green Everett holed out in two. "One under for the last four," he said to Barney. "Not a bad finish."

He steered the small, quiet cart up the slight rise in front of the clubhouse, bumped onto the asphalt

driveway and headed for the top of the hill. There were no spectators.

Then the front doors of the clubhouse burst open. Seven or eight of the old reliables, drinks spilling, some with spikes on, others in stocking feet, ran on varicosed legs toward their two friends. Shouts of "Who won?" and "Who gets the cup?" and "Who buys the drinks?" came from the crowd of over-sixty rowdies. They surrounded the cart and smiled expectantly.

Everett stood up. He noticed that one of the boys was carrying the real cause of all the commotion, the trophy. "I won," he said, "on the fourteenth. Five and four." He held out his arms.

"Way to shoot, Ev!"

"Good boy!"

They handed him the trophy.

"You finally did it."

"Nice shooting."

A red-faced, puffing senior approached Barney. "What happened, Barney? You're awful quiet." He prodded him playfully in the stomach. That was all it took.

Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, the lifeless form of

Barney Swatz, fierce competitor, crashed to the driveway. He lay still, stomach up, arms and legs stiffly outstretched like a child making angels in the snow. After a silent eternity, Everett stepped down from the cart and, clutching his trophy, walked through the circle of his stunned comrades toward the showers.

On a reasonably clement day, if you drive the winding, back roads ten miles out of town, you can see Everett playing golf. It's a pleasant nine-hole course attached to the Provincial Rest Home. He plays alone now—if you don't count the white-coated, muscular caddy—and holds the course record.

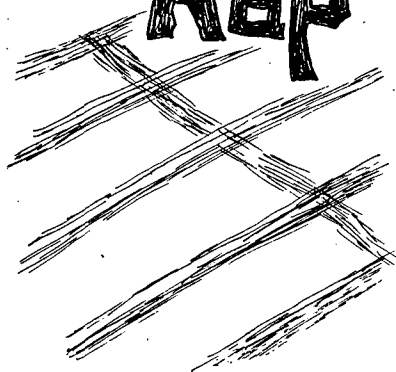
Everett seems happy, particularly on his daily trip through the lobby. They show him his trophy and he smiles. The doctors agree that he'll never leave. They say he'll have to spend the rest of his days at the Home, playing golf if he wishes. It's a shame, really, but a just and fitting end for one who took a life; and not all that bad for an old golfer.



A little underground work may be necessary to keep the status quo.



A Bum Rap



A guy getting out of prison figures he needs two things right away: a drink and a dame. I'd made that mistake the last time I walked out the gate. This time I had it figured.

I was already thirty-eight and had been in prison more than half those years, from reform school to the state penitentiary. The parole board would take an unfavorable

attitude if I came back again. Besides, my last fall was a bum rap.

I'd been in a bar and Chicago Harry, who's done time in five states, offered me a ride home. I was drunk enough not to notice how drunk he was. I fell asleep as soon as I climbed into the car and didn't come to until sirens were screaming around us. Harry had stopped and held up a gas station, the attendant set off a hidden alarm, and we were caught before we got six blocks. At the trial the kid swore I was in the car with the motor running while Harry pulled the job. I got two-to-ten.

When I got out, I wanted to stay out. I was getting too old to keep starting over at the bottom. If I went back to my old life it would only be a matter of time. I figured if I stayed away from drinking and women, I'd have a chance. So I came up with my plan.

Rule one was no drinking in bars. I'd buy a pint and have a few when I got home from the lousy job my parole officer had lined up for me. With only a pint I couldn't get into any trouble.

By staying away from bars, I also would not meet any broads to lead me to more booze and more trouble. This only half-solved the problem, since I didn't really want to stay away from women. That's where the second part of my plan came in. I ran an ad in the personal column of the newspaper. I spent a long time getting it just right:

Middle-aged male, wrongfully convicted, just released after 5 years, desires to meet liberal-minded

was up to, how much the take would be, what his share was, and when I'd gotten out—in that order. He laughed when I said I was going legit. We'd known each other twenty years. Bill knew more about me than the police blotter, and his information could put me away where the parole board would never find me, but Bill played the percentages and kept his eye and hand out for the easy buck. The fact that his hand was always in some-



female with mean\$\$\$\$\$. Contact by phone. 777-3214. Ask for Big John.

When the paper came out, the hall phone in the boardinghouse rang twice. The first time, the dame was young, drunk and sounded like trouble even over a few miles of wire. I got rid of her fast.

The second call was from Bunco Bill, who wanted to know what I

one else's bag showed his shrewdness. He didn't risk his neck or freedom by pulling jobs. He was content with his cut for brainwork.

I still owed him a bundle for his help on a job I pulled twelve years ago. He wasn't happy when I got picked up before I could pay off and he was even less happy when the take vanished with the broad in whose apartment I had hidden it.

Bill's memory was long when it came to money, and the five years I'd just done hadn't dimmed it. I stalled him by promising to stop by in a couple of days.

It was almost noon when the phone rang again.

"Hello?" I was gruffer than I'd meant to be. I was edgy from waiting.

"Hello. Is Big John there?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Amy Valdish."

I felt a stir of excitement. My tone softened. "This is him."

"I'm calling . . . I saw your ad in the personals."

Phase two of my plan called for a slow and easy buildup. Amy Valdish . . . she sounded middle-aged and lonely.

"I'd like to talk to you," she said.

I reviewed the steps of phase two. "Do you want to talk on the phone, Miss Valdish, or should we meet someplace?"

"I think we should meet." She didn't correct my use of Miss.

"How about the Armand Hotel coffee shop? You pick a time. Then if you change your mind you don't have to show."

"I wouldn't do that." She sounded very sure of herself. "Is two o'clock too soon?"

"It's fine."

"How will I know you?"

"I'll tell the hostess I'm waiting

for you. She can point me out and you can make up your mind. I'll wait until two-thirty."

"I'll be there at two," she said.

At the Armand, I sat by the window with my back to the door. She'd see my best angle first. No one had ever accused me of being handsome, but I had a rugged quality that seemed to appeal to women. I'd picked up fifteen extra pounds sitting in a cell, but the cut of the blue sport coat hid them. My angular face could be called strong instead of tough, and the streaks of gray the last five years had given my hair added a touch of dignity. At least I liked to think so.

I studied the reflections in the glass. I made out the doorway and the girl in yellow who was seating people. A gray blur joined her and I concentrated on it as they came toward me. The hostess pulled out the other chair. I looked up.

The gray suit was perfectly tailored, no rack job. The sparkling pin on her lapel was real diamonds. She wore a sheer scarf at her throat, but under it I could see the wrinkles time had drawn. She was past forty, and probably had been pretty once. She still wasn't bad, but her face was set in hard lines. Her hair was gray enough to look frosty; her eyes were lavender in the reflected light from the street, or maybe it was the scarf.

I smiled. She sat, putting her hands on the table palms down, like a teacher waiting for the class to come to attention. Her fingers were long and thin and the huge diamond ring looked top-heavy. She seemed unaware of it or my quick appraisal.

"Miss Valdish?"

"Yes. I told you I would come."

"I'm glad you did." I kept my voice low. "My name is John Collins."

"How do you do?"

I laughed softly at her automatic politeness and it got a twitch of a smile from her. I began to feel a little confident, but not enough to forget phase two. "You're wondering what my ad is all about, aren't you?"

She looked right at me. "Yes."

I waited while the girl poured her coffee and refilled my cup. Amy shook her head when the waitress offered a menu.

"I'll explain," I said. "Don't say anything until I finish."

She sat back and waited. Slowly, in a voice that didn't carry past the table, I told her my story. When I finished, I lifted my hands in a gesture of defeat. "I got two-to-ten and served five years in the state pen." I glanced out the window and then back at her. "I'm going to level with you. I have the feeling you're the kind of woman who appreciates

complete honesty. This wasn't my first rap."

She never even blinked.

"I did six years, three months and eighteen days on a burglary rap twelve years ago." I frowned. "That's why I didn't have a chance this time. A guy can prove he was someplace else and have ten witnesses to back his story, but it doesn't cut ice with a judge or jury. Once you have a record, you're guilty, no matter what."

The diamond on her finger sent arrows of light across the table. "You were with the holdup man," she said.

I nodded. "But I wasn't in on the job. I told the truth at the trial, for all the good it did."

"Didn't the other man tell the police you were innocent?"

"The word of an ex-con caught red-handed in a heist?" I laughed. "I was violating my parole just being with him." I traced a pattern on the tablecloth. "That's the hard part of getting out. You're not supposed to have anything to do with other ex-cons, but the straight Johns on the street won't have anything to do with you." I looked up. "That's why I put the ad in the paper."

"To meet someone who is not an ex-convict?"

"Right. I can make a few bucks as a dishwasher or dock-loader, but

that's not how I want to spend the rest of my life. Last time I got out I worked at the crummy jobs people are willing to give ex-cons and all I met were other ex-cons." I shrugged. "How could I meet anyone else? When I went up for parole this time, I knew if I went back to slopping dishes I'd be in trouble before I knew it." My voice dropped. "I can't take being locked up again."

She leaned forward. "Why did you advertise for a woman of means?" The words were little chips of ice floating in the silence. At least she didn't beat around the bush.

I didn't either. "I want a woman who can help me financially until I get on my feet." We both weighed the statement and each other. "In return I'll escort her wherever she wants to go, be on call for anything she needs. When I make it, I'll pay back every penny she's invested in me—with interest." I paused. "I just need someone to believe in me."

She looked at me. "I believe in you, Mr. Collins."

I smiled. "It was lucky for me you saw my ad, Miss Valdish . . . Amy. But I don't want you to make a hasty decision. Think about it."

She set down her cup. "I already have. I wouldn't have called otherwise. Everyone is entitled to a second chance. To make mistakes is

human, John. I've made some, too, and as a result I'm lonely." Her gaze didn't waver. "I was married for a short time, but it didn't work out. Since then I've had companions and housekeepers, but they were very dull. The company of a man, an escort, should be far more satisfactory."

It seemed odd that she had to buy friends, but I wasn't going to argue. She was exactly what I'd described in my ad.

The next day I moved into the huge house two miles outside of town. It was a relic, full of crystal and silver, oriental rugs and antiques. Except for a woman who came in every day but Thursday to cook and clean, we were alone. If Amy worried about gossip, it didn't show.

It took a while to settle into the new life I'd found. At first I kept being surprised by Amy's easy acceptance of things I'd only dreamed existed. We ate in the long dining room by candlelight, using sterling silver and bone china. After dinner, we sat in front of the fireplace drinking brandy from snifters the size of flowerpots. I smoked hand-rolled cigars she bought me, wore the brocaded smoking jacket she'd chosen. When she decided, we went upstairs; and when she said so, I spent an hour or two in her room before I went to sleep in my own. It

was as if she had waited a long time for me. She was a demanding lover, but I didn't object. At forty-odd, she wasn't bad; and at thirty-eight, I finally had it made.

Amy may have been lonely before I came along, but it didn't take me long to realize that she wasn't weak. She knew what she wanted and she got it. She organized my life completely, filling the hours with the things she wanted to do. She didn't refer to my past. The question of finding me a job never came up, and I didn't mention it.

I drove her to town in the sleek black sedan a couple of times a week. She shopped often and she wasn't stingy. She bought me suits, coats and shoes to fill a closet. She watched my diet and my waistline began to slim down. We went to concerts, art shows, the Garden Club meetings. She really liked having me near her. She had a way of curling her fingers on my arm as though I were part of her. Once I pulled away and the quick flash of anger in her eyes showed me she didn't like it. Her fingers seemed tighter after that but I never pulled away again. Living with Amy was a lot better than a cell or that lousy boardinghouse. I could put up with her possessiveness in exchange for my new role as gentleman of leisure.

The only work I did was to put-

ter in the garden or greenhouse. Amy was proud of her flowers and very fussy about them. A regular gardening service came in once a week and kept everything in top shape, but I liked to breathe the fresh air and feel the sun on my back. Also, it was the only time I ever got away from Amy for more than a minute or two.

I'd been there about two months when Bunco Bill called. Amy handed me the receiver with a scowl. Nobody had phoned me before, and she didn't like the change in the pattern.

"Hello?"

"Long time no see, Big John. How's it going?" Bunco's gravelly voice was cool but firm.

I glanced through the archway to the livingroom to make sure Amy was out of earshot. "Okay, Bill. What can I do for you?" As if I had to ask.

"There's a little matter we should talk over," he said.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I answered quickly.

He laughed. "I do. I was thinking maybe I should come over and introduce myself to your lady friend. From what I hear, she's got quite a place there, and you ain't hurting none."

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "It's not what you think, Bill. I'm playing it straight."

He snorted. "So am I, Big John. I want my dough and I want it now."

"I can't—"

"Think about it, Big John. With your smarts, you'll find a way. Suppose I come out there to see you—let's say tomorrow morning about ten?"

"I can't do anything that fast!"

"Find a way," he said coldly, "or I'll find it for you." The phone clicked.

It was several minutes before I replaced the receiver and returned to the livingroom. I avoided Amy's eyes.

"Who was that?" she demanded.

I had trouble getting the words out. "A guy I know."

"Obviously. What 'guy,' as you so crudely put it?"

I poured the brandy and handed her a glass. My hand shook a little and my brain was on overtime trying to come up with an answer that would satisfy her without cutting my own throat. "He helped me out once, and I owe him some money."

The silence was harder than her look. I tried again. "I'm sorry, Amy, but it's the truth. I didn't make any excuses for the kind of life I led before I met you. Bunco Bill was part of that life, and he thinks I should pay off my debt."

"You have a new life now, John. I won't tolerate any ties with your old one."

I frowned. "Bill sees things differently."

Her eyes glittered. "How much do you owe him?"

I sipped the brandy, swirling the glass slowly between my palms. "He figures ten grand." I kept my gaze on the dark liquid in my glass. I heard her soft, indrawn breath and waited.

"And how do you figure?" There was a tight band of anger in her tone.

I looked up and shrugged. "In cash, he only put up a couple of hundred bucks. But he considered it an investment—one that should have paid off. It wasn't his fault the deal fell through."

A log fell in the grate and a shower of sparks flared against the fire screen. The tiny lights reflected in her eyes. She stared at me for a long time. Then she put the brandy glass on the table and went to the desk. She took out the steel box where she kept the household money, unlocked it and came back to me with some bills.

"I assume your 'friend' made some arrangements to collect his money. Give him this." She fanned the money and I saw there were five century notes. "Tell him it pays your actual debt and some interest. It's all he's going to get. He'd better be satisfied with it. Make sure he knows this is the *only* payoff. I want

him to leave you alone. He's not to call or contact you again in any way. You have no ties at all with your past anymore. See that he understands it." She dropped the bills in my lap and walked out. She paused in the doorway and looked over her shoulder. "I'll wait for you upstairs."

I pocketed the dough. I was surprised at how easily she'd given it to me. Maybe her idea would work; maybe Bill would settle for the cash. It was a long shot, but it was worth a try. Besides, I didn't have any choice. I finished my brandy and poked the logs to the back of the fireplace before I turned out the lights and went up to her.

In the morning I was up early. I watched at the front window, hoping Amy wouldn't come down before Bill got there. I spotted him walking up the drive and went out to intercept him. He looked a little surprised when I steered him into the greenhouse. He kept looking over my shoulder toward the kitchen door.

"You got my ten gee's?" he asked.

I shook my head. "There's no way, Bill. You're asking the impossible."

His experienced eye took in the rows of plants, the air-conditioning unit in the corner, the garden beyond the glass walls. He was adding

their value to that of the house and the cost of its upkeep. I wasn't conning him. He'd probably checked and knew more about Amy's bank account than I did.

I tried to fast-talk my way out. "Look, Bill, all my life I've wanted a sweet spot like this. Hell, for the first time I'm on easy street." I dug into my pocket and pulled out the five hundreds and waved them under his nose. "Here, take this. There's no way I can come up with the dough that stupid broad ran off with. She's got that spent long ago. And I ain't pulling any more jobs and risking more time." I avoided his cold glance. "I like the setup here, but if you push too hard, I'll have to move on."

"I'll find you wherever you go, Big John."

I tried to look unconcerned. "What good will it do if I'm broke? I haven't got the dough, and there's no way I can get it."

Bill's eyes swept around the layout. I knew what he was thinking.

"That won't work either," I said quickly. "When she gave me the five hundred she said that was it."

He looked at the expensive slacks and the monogrammed sport shirt I was wearing.

"She handles all the money," I added.

He reached for a cigar from his pocket and spat the end toward a

shelf of seedlings. "Listen, Big John, and listen good. You have found yourself a gold mine and you'd better start working it. I'll be back in two weeks for the next installment. You should be able to come across with a grand every couple of weeks."

"Two weeks! I can't do anything that fast!"

"You'll think of something," he said with a cold smile. "Your lady friend has plenty of jewelry. She wouldn't miss a few pieces. Otherwise, the cops may uncover a few facts they've overlooked before and you could wind up back in the joint." He clamped the cigar between his teeth and his hand snaked out for the five hundred. "I'll be back two weeks from Monday." He walked out.

I watched numbly until he was out of sight beyond the high hedge. I jerked at a small sound behind me, but there was nothing. The kitchen door was closed tight and the garden was empty. My nerves were jumpy.

They didn't get any better the next two weeks. Every time I walked past the silver coffee service on the buffet, my palms began to sweat. When Amy dressed to go out, I could hardly take my eyes off the diamond earrings and rings she put on; but there was no way I could meet Bill's demand. Amy had

been just as positive in hers, and I was caught between them. Even if I had found the nerve to try to take something from the house, I was never alone long enough to try it.

Amy didn't mention Bill again. It was as though the matter were settled and wiped from her mind. However, she watched me with a new kind of possessiveness that made me uneasy.

Then the deadline Bill had set passed and I began to relax a little. He hadn't phoned or come back. Maybe I had convinced him after all. Maybe the long shot was paying off.

On Thursday I was whistling as I walked into the greenhouse. Amy was standing at the sink washing her hands. Her gloves and a basket of pink and white peonies lay on the counter. She looked up. "I thought some flowers would brighten the house."

"I'd have cut them if you'd asked."

"It's such a lovely morning, I wanted some fresh air. By the way, I saw some aphids on the roses. We'd better not wait for the gardener. You'll have to spray the bushes right away." She turned to inspect a shelf of cans and bottles. "Yes, I knew I still had it. There," she pointed, "use that. The directions are on the label."

I lifted down the can with the

poison warning under the skull and crossbones. She picked up her basket and started for the house. "Do a good job, John. The roses are coming along so beautifully, I'd hate to lose them."

By the time I finished spraying, the sun was overhead and the day had grown hot. I left my dirty shoes by the door and walked stocking-footed across the kitchen. I heard a low murmur of voices, and when I walked into the livingroom I stopped in my tracks. Sitting across from Amy, looking very comfortable in the gold velvet chair, was Bunco Bill.

Bill grinned and lifted his coffee cup with his little finger stuck straight out. "Hello, Big John. Nice to see you again."

I stared. I knew then that he had phoned, but Amy had taken the call. I looked at her.

"We've been having a chat," she said carefully. "Go change those gardening clothes and join us."

I was back in less than ten minutes.

"Anyone who's done time knows the problems a man faces when he gets out," Bill was saying.

Amy frowned but looked interested. "And you think a halfway house is the solution?"

Bill lifted his shoulders. "There's no quick cure, but if the men have a place where people understand

them, they have a better chance. They need time to get on their feet and find work. If they're broke and lonely, they drift right back into crime."

"And you think ten thousand dollars is enough to set up the program?"

So that was it! He was trying to con her out of the money I owed him. He didn't trust me to get it! For a minute I was mad, then the tension eased. If he got the dough, maybe he'd leave me alone—and Amy had plenty more. Maybe it was a way out. I couldn't be responsible for what Bill did with the money once he left.

Bill sipped his coffee before he answered. "For a start."

Then I knew this was only the beginning. I could hear the wheels turning in his skull, counting the dollars he could milk from Amy. He'd never be content with a slice if he could grab the loaf.

Amy lifted a plate of iced cakes and held them out to him. "Try one of these. I made them myself." She glanced at me. "None for you, John. We don't want to spoil your diet, now that you're doing so well on it."

I felt Bill's quick glance of amusement, but he let it go. He bit off half the cake in one bite.

"What do you think about a halfway house, John?" Amy asked.

I hid behind my coffee cup and tried to think. I was still thinking hard when Bill's cup clattered from his hand and a dark stain of coffee trailed down the front of his coat. His face twisted horribly behind the flecks of cake crumbs clinging to his lips. He tried to get up but his body jerked forward and he fell to the floor. He doubled up and each breath squeezed from his lungs in a painful gasp. His eyes searched mine for a second, then closed. He twitched and was still.

Amy looked at me. "He won't bother us anymore, John."

I was still looking at Bill.

"I think it would be wise to bury him in the garden. Near the roses, perhaps."

My mouth opened but no sound came out.

"Don't dig too close to the Crimson Glories. They're doing so well now." She glanced at my clothes. "You'll have to change again."

I couldn't move. She had murdered Bill in cold blood for a lousy ten grand! I stared at her. No, not for ten grand! To keep me! She'd heard Bill and me in the greenhouse

that morning, and she wasn't taking any chances on letting me slip away.

If I buried Bill I would be an accomplice to murder. A film of sweat coated my neck. Suddenly the easy life didn't seem worth it. Robbery is one thing, but murder—

Amy's eyes were like amethysts, hard and cold. "Do as I say, John. We wouldn't want the police."

I wasn't so sure.

"It might be difficult to explain how your friend died, especially with your fingerprints on the can of poison." Her mouth carved a smile across her face. "Go now, but don't be long. We're due at the Garden Club at two." Her eyes held mine. "A pity he didn't believe you really have a whole new life."

In the greenhouse, I saw the can of poison was gone. I wondered about the Crimson Glories and Amy's husband who hadn't been around very long. I got a shovel from the tool shed and dragged Bill between the rows of potted plants. The sun slanting through the frames of the roof was as cold as it had ever been through steel bars.



Before one starts saving, he should figure out if he can afford it.

The Girl Who Jumped in the River

It was after dark when I came along the Redding Bridge, going home from work. I was late. Usually I get out earlier, but if I had I wouldn't have met her. I only saw her because I was on the walkway right beside the railing.

By
Arthur
Moore



She was on an iron crossbeam, just out of the water, and she was soaking wet. I figured she had tried to end it all and had got cold feet at the last minute. You see those things in the papers all the time. Anyway it sure surprised me, seeing her. I got over the rail and down there in a second and grabbed her. There wasn't anybody around. A few cars passed, crossing the bridge as I hauled her over the railing, but nobody stopped.

When I had her safe, I said, "Holy smoke, what'd you try that for?"

She glared at me like I had something to do with it. "I like swimming," she said with a lot of sarcasm. "What'd you think?"

So I shut up. I knew she hadn't gone in swimming. It was way too chilly for that.

My name is Ralph Callicut and I work across the bridge at the Ender Hardware plant, which is a wholesale place. I don't have a car, so I walk back and forth across the bridge except when the weather is bad, then I take the bus.

Well, her teeth began to chatter, of course, because she was sopping and in a very bad way. I asked her where she lived and she said in Minneapolis, which was a long way off, so I figured she meant she was a stranger in town.

What do you think? I ended up

taking her to my apartment so she could get dry. By the time we got there she was a worse mess, hair all stringy and her disposition very edgy. I got the heater going; she shucked her clothes in the bedroom, put on my old bathrobe and stood in front of the heater with her clothes spread out to dry.

"Jeez, Ralph," she said, "can't you make this thing hotter?"

I said it only got so hot and that was it. It was, too. I had already told her my name. She said hers was Louise, and she was hungry. I said I could make her some soup and she sighed like it would have to do.

She was looking at me very close. "I thought you were older."

"I'm twenty-three."

"Yeah? So am I. What d'you do?"

I told her I work for a hardware company. She wanted to know what I make and I told her a hundred and four take-home every week, but with a chance of advancement.

She said, "Yeah?"

So I went in and fixed her the soup. I had already eaten at Joe's Place. While the soup was heating she came in and looked around the kitchen. It is not big. I have a small pad; livingroom, bedroom and kitchen. The landlord is going to paint next year, he says.

She looked at the soup and the peanut butter on the shelves. "Izzat

all you eat, soup an' peanut butter?"

"You want some? I got bread, too."

"No, thanks."

She had combed her hair a little. It was slightly curly with frizzy ends, a little darker than blonde. Her face was shiny and raw-looking, with lines because she was tired. With no makeup she was on the seedy side. I wondered if she had run off from a husband, but I didn't ask her. She had a snappy way of talking; she bit at you, sort of. I guessed she'd had a bad time, having to jump into the river and all.

Louise ate the soup. I made her some toast and she ate that too, even with peanut butter. She was hungrier than she thought. Then she smoked a cigarette and stared at me. "Don'cha have any coffee?"

I said sure, and boiled some water and made instant.

I wasn't used to having a girl around. I never did get married, and I don't have a steady girlfriend. Girls like me OK, but I'm not pushy, you know what I mean? When I ask them for a second date they usually say, "Oh gee, Ralph, why didn'cha ask me sooner? I got something to do tonight." Like that.

While we had coffee, Louise turned all her clothes over and let them dry on the other side. She

smoked most of my pack and kept staring at me. I went into the bathroom once and combed my hair.

It was after eight o'clock when her shoes and clothes were all dry. They were pretty wrinkled, but she went into the bedroom and put them on. She was a very rumpled doll, but I didn't say so.

Then she told me she had a suitcase.

I asked, "Where?"

"It's at a guy's house. He's keeping it for me."

"Where's the house?"

She told me. It was about a mile away. She wanted to go over and get it. She got up and said, "Why don't we go over and get it?"

I said, "OK," and we went. About halfway there I began to wonder why I was going with her, but I couldn't back out then. We walked all the way and she found the house easy. It was a tall flat; we went in and up the stairs. She knocked at a door on the second floor. A guy opened it and frowned at her. He was about my size and had a pencil behind his ear. He said, "Oh, hi, Louise . . ."

She said, "I came for my bag, Charlie."

I was surprised, because he had it waiting for her right by the door. He just shoved it with his foot and she looked at me, so I stepped in and picked it up. Charlie stared at

me too, but he didn't say anything at all, only I kind of thought he smiled a little bit. When I backed out he slammed the door.

"He was just keeping it for me," Louise said as we went down to the street.

It was on my mind to ask her, "What next?" but she marched us right back to my pad like that was the only place to go. I didn't know what to say.

When we got inside she went right into the bedroom and flopped on the bed. "Jeez, you made me walk the whole way. My feet're killing me."

I said, "You wanna go to bed?" I guess I had ideas.

She looked at me then with a kind of funny stare. "Yeah, why don'cha sleep on the couch, Ralph?"

So I said, "Sure, OK." Well, what the crackers—just for one night.

In the morning, instead of eating at Joe's again, I had to rush out for milk, eggs and some bacon. Louise said she liked bacon. "Get some marmalade too, Ralph."

While we were eating she asked me what my hours were and I told her, then I asked her, "What you going to do today?" I thought maybe she had someplace to go. "You going someplace?"

She said, "Nowhere. I guess I'll stay here."

I figured she had to think things over. I gave her a couple of bucks in case she needed to get something—you know. Then I slid out.

That night when I got off, I was sure surprised to see Louise coming across the bridge to meet me. It gave me a funny feeling having a sort of pretty girl interested in me. I guess I'm not a Don Juan or anything, really.

She was looking me over when we met. She said, "Don't slouch over that way, Ralph."

I said I wouldn't and we walked back to the apartment. I hoped she had made dinner, but she hadn't. She said she thought we were going out somewhere, which was funny because I hadn't mentioned nothing. Anyhow, I took her to a beanery where they have pretty good stuff, but she didn't think too much of it. They used too much salt in everything, she said.

I asked her what she did all day and she said she slept most of the time. "Except you can't sleep real good because of all that street racket under the window."

I said I was sorry.

When I turned on the TV set, she said, "How come you still got a black and white, huh?"

After a while I made some more coffee, and when it got late I realized she was going to stay there that night, too.

So I slept on the couch again.

I thought a lot about it the next day, but when I got home that night the apartment was all changed around. Louise had gone out and bought new curtains and charged them to me at the neighborhood center where they know me. Also she got me a new pillow for the couch. "It's better for you than those two little ones."

She had a fifth of gin too, and a couple of boxes of cookies. Later, when I saw the bottle, it was down by half and the cookies were all gone.

The next time she came across the bridge to meet me after work she said the stores were still open and that she really needed a new dress because she only had one. So I took her shopping. She bought a dress, panty hose, a pair of shoes and some underwear.

"I'll get the rest later," she said.

On the way back to the bridge she noticed Manny's Hofbrau Cafe, which is a kind of ritzy spot in the little park at the end of the bridge. I had never been there. Louise said it looked a lot better than the beanery.

Dinner cost me eleven bucks; just the dinner alone. Her martinis cost a buck eighty.

That really started me thinking.

I am sort of an easygoing guy, not pushy at all. I've never been

pushy with dames. But by this time I was beginning to figure that if I was letting her sleep in my bed, with me on the old lumpy couch, and buying her expensive dinners and gin and cigarettes and clothes, especially underwear, that maybe I ought to have something going *my* way. You know what I mean? It occurs to a guy. Things like that, they occur to a guy.

So, later on, when we got home and she was in the bed and I was on the old, lumpy couch—well, I got up and went into the bedroom.

Louise turned over and said, "Hey, what you doing in here?"

"I thought . . . er . . . it seemed to me—"

"Hey, Ralph, you just knock off with those ideas."

"But . . . b-but—"

"No buts. We don't hardly know each other."

So I went back to the couch and thought about that. It was sort of true. Only it *did* seem to me that we could speed up the learning.

I kept on thinking about it. In the morning I got up and made both breakfasts, then thought about it all the way to work. At lunch time I had to borrow a buck because I had given Louise all my dough.

When I got home she was watching TV. She had bought another bottle of gin and more cookies. After I cooked dinner and was wash-

ing up, I asked her about the gin and she bit at me again, so I didn't say nothing more. The house was in a kind of mess, so I mopped and dusted a little and she complained that I was making her sneeze.

She said, "Why don'cha do that on Saturdays?"

I said, "You could do a little something . . ."

She looked at me and snapped, "Hey, we're not married, Ralph."

Yeah. That was true, all right.

The next day a new bed was delivered—some surprise when I got home! My old one was gone. The new one had a pinkish coverlet on it and some of those cute little rag dolls sitting at the corners. There were frilly yellow and pink curtains on the two bedroom windows.

"That old bed was saggy in the middle, Ralph."

"Oh?" I hadn't noticed that. I said I hadn't noticed it.

"You don't notice anything, Ralph. I had my hair done, too."

Then I saw it; and I also noticed the bills that were piling up. She had put them under my new pillow on the couch. They added up to a lot more than I make in a week; one bill was for two more bottles of gin.

One evening the apartment house manager stopped me in the hall and asked about something. I was edgy because I thought he'd

want to raise the rent because Louise was there, but he didn't say nothing, which surprised me. He is the snappy-dresser kind of sport who plays the ponies and is very tight with a buck if the buck happens to be his. It sure surprised me, him not adding a little something to the rent. He asked me when I was going to work late next. That was all.

I happened to ask Louise if she had met him and she said, "Why don'cha fix yourself up a little bit, Ralph? You don't always have to look like a grape picker."

I said, using her comeback, "Ha-ha, we're not married."

"Ha-ha, you bet. You sure are a smart aleck, Ralph."

Then the guy in the grocery store mentioned her the next time I went in; and when I left he said, "Say hello to Louise, pal. Tell 'er Freddie said hello."

I had been trading there a year and I didn't even know his name was Freddie.

The telephone bill was forty-seven bucks because of long-distance calls to Chicago. When I yelled, Louise said she didn't make them. She didn't know anybody in Chicago. I called the operator and she gave me a rundown when I complained.

"They were made to a party named Kostivich, sir."

I told her that was their trouble. They had made a mistake and got my phone calls mixed up with the manager's. *His* name was Kostivich, not mine. She gave me an argument, then called the supervisor who said they didn't make them kind of mistakes. I didn't get anywhere with them.

Louise said "Jeez, don't make a big stink, Ralph."

So all this stuff was making me think more and more. I'm not dumb, you know.

Then there was the neighborhood saloon near my apartment. I hardly ever went into it, but one night I did, just to sort of have a beer and think. You know.

The bartender said, "Hey, aren't you Ralph What's-his-name?"

I said, "Yeah, why?"

He leaned an elbow on the bar and looked at me with funny little fish eyes. "Oh, nothin'." Then he moved away.

When I went out, he said, "Hey, Ralph, say hello to Louise, huh? From Butchy."

I said, "Sure, Butchy." He glowered at me.

That was one more thing that made a guy wonder.

On Friday night Louise met me outside the hardware plant when I got off work. She was wearing a new dress and shoes and looked pretty good. "You never take me nowhere, Ralph," she said. "How about us going to Manny's Hofbrau for dinner?"

I said, looking at her new stuff, "Holy crackers, I can't afford it."

She sniffed. "Jeez, Ralph, you sure are a cheapskate."

Well, I took her, and it cost me fourteen bucks this time. She went for the Wiener-something-or-other and two martinis. Man, did she sop up the gin!

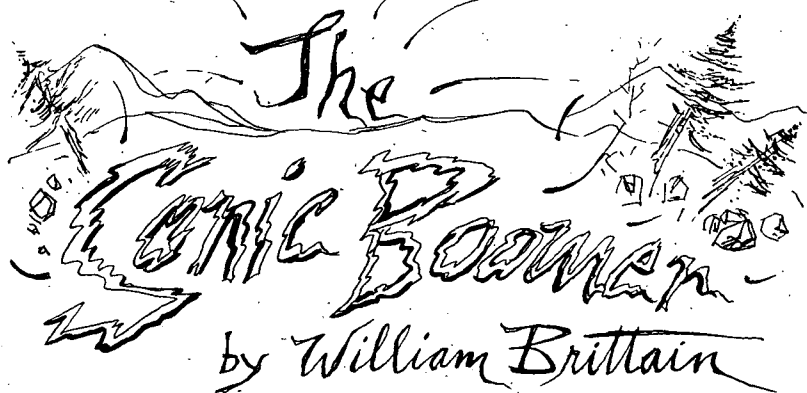
I had just about done all my thinking by then. I don't go off half-cocked or anything.

It was dark when we got out of the cafe and strolled back across the bridge. There wasn't any traffic at all, so I threw her over the railing into the river and went on home.

If she comes knocking at my door in two or three hours with a new guy from the bridge, I'll have her suitcase ready.



Only by putting together the bits and pieces can one figure out the puzzle.



The Enigma Man

by William Brittain

Deception, Hager. That's our sole purpose here in Special Effects. We leave all the usual spying jobs—obtaining secret enemy documents, checking troop and materiel movements, occasional bits of discreet sabotage—to the CIA boys. Naturally, we work rather closely with the CIA at times. But Special Effects Branch is in business only to make the enemy believe things that aren't true. And, of course, to prevent the enemy from doing the same to us."

Sherman Rhime tilted back his swivel chair and looked up at the young man standing on the far side

of the polished expanse of desk. Why was it, he wondered, that the newly trained agents coming in for their first assignments always reminded him of schoolboys who'd been sent to the principal for being naughty? Well, Hager, like all the rest, would mature quickly in Special Effects.

"In our hands," Rhime went on, "things are seldom what they seem. A few life rafts covered with metal foil become, in the enemy's electronic eyes, a huge armada of ships; lengths of drainage pipe are transformed into missile launching sites; a plastic souvenir purchased in a

Hong Kong shop is suddenly the key to our expenditures to obtain it."

"I believe I understand, sir," Hager said. "Special Effects not only keeps enemy agents busy tracking down false leads, but also confuses them as to what our real capabilities are."

"Exactly," said Rhime. "Now, let's see how much good your training did. Go over to the door there. You'll find a small peephole. Look through it for exactly five seconds."

As Hager applied his eye to the small hole, Rhime looked at his watch. "Time!" he called, when five seconds had ticked off. Hager returned to the desk and stood ramrod straight. "Describe what you saw," commanded Rhime.

"Your outer office, sir," Hager replied. "One man there, pacing the floor. The walls of the office are painted yel—"

"Never mind the office," Rhime said. "Describe the man."

"Height about five-foot-ten," Hager recited. "His weight well over two hundred pounds; that belly of his hangs out over his belt like bread dough rising out of a baking pan. Rounded shoulders, almost no neck. His face has thick jowls, and he's got kind of a scrub growth of moustache. His expression is tired and sad—a bit like a basset hound. I'll bet his feet hurt. I

couldn't see the top of his head because he was wearing a hat. But the hair at the sides was black with a lot of gray in it."

"Very good," commented Rhime. "What about his clothing?"

"The hat I mentioned is pretty beat up. The band is frayed in several places. His suit's a blue pin-stripe, badly in need of pressing. The knot of his tie is about two inches off-center. Black shoes, run-down at the heels. Anything else, sir?"

"Yes. How about taking a stab at his age and occupation."

"Oh, he'd be about fifty years old, and he looks like a small businessman after a hard day. Maybe a baker who enjoys his own cooking. No, his hands aren't clean enough. Hardware, that's it. You've brought him here to see about changing some locks. Right?" Hager leaned forward eagerly.

"Ask him to come in, will you?" Rhime said. "He answers to the name of Pennyman."

At Hager's invitation, Pennyman shuffled tiredly into the room and stood at the desk, ponderously shifting his weight from one foot to the other and emitting a sigh that would have done credit to a water buffalo.

"Hager," Rhime said softly, "have you considered the possibility that Mr. Pennyman might be

a spy himself? Perhaps sent here to kill me?"

"Oh, come now, sir. This man a spy? Why . . . why, look at him. Flabby, overweight, that hangdog expression. He'd never—"

"Best search him anyway," Rhime said. "See if he has any weapons."

Starting at the shoulders, Hager expertly patted the jacket of Pennyman's wrinkled suit. As his hands reached the ample waist, Hager suddenly stopped, his eyes widening. Reaching gingerly beneath the jacket, he drew from its spring holster a .357 Magnum revolver with a stubby two-inch barrel.

With a good deal more respect and care, Hager finished patting Pennyman's clothing, giving special attention to the sleeves and trouser legs. Finally he turned about to face Rhime. "He's clean, sir. No other weapons. Would you like me to look through his pock—"

Hager's voice was suddenly cut off as a thick arm encircled his neck and a knife with a strangely curved blade pressed at the flesh under his chin. "One wiggle and you're a dead man, youngster," rumbled a voice in his ear.

Rhime savored the moment, lighting a cigarette while the two men across from him remained frozen in position. "Oh, let him go, Pennyman," he said finally. "With a

little luck and some expert guidance he may survive in the field for as long as a week."

Pennyman spread his arms wide, and Hager sprawled into a chair, gasping for breath. "The knife," he wheezed. "Where—"

"In my hatband," Pennyman said. "It's specially curved to fit. Looks funny, but I could throw it in your ear at twenty paces."

"Show him what other goodies you have," commanded Rhime.

From a small pocket behind his necktie, Pennyman removed a length of thin wire with a ring at each end. "Strangling cord," he said simply. "And my wristwatch can be set to blow your hand off the moment you touch it. That's about all right now, sir."

"Mr. Hager," Rhime said in clipped, precise tones, "you've made an error—a bad one. A careless search is worse than none at all. Pennyman could have killed you with that knife, and I assure you that in spite of his rather ineffectual appearance, he would have done so with no compunction whatsoever."

"Does this mean I'm through here?" Hager asked in a whisper.

"Not as long as you realize that your training has only begun. Pennyman, I have a job for you. And you'll need help."

Pennyman groaned, and his face assumed an even sadder expression

than his customary gloomy aspect.

The meaning of Rhime's last sentence suddenly penetrated Hager's mind, and he sat bolt upright. "Sir, you don't mean—"

"But I do, Hager. I'm assigning you to Pennyman."

"You're too kind, sir," Pennyman said dryly. "How do I get all the lucky breaks?"

"All right," Rhime said, ignoring the jibe. "Let's get on with it. Take seats, please."

From a roller on the wall behind the desk, Rhime pulled down a map of eastern Canada. With a pointer he indicated a spot near the center of Quebec Province. "Nichicum Lake," he said. "You'll have to be flown in by seaplane. There are no roads in the area. There are, however, a couple of cabins on the south shore. That's where you'll contact Dr. Vrioti."

"Dr. Vrioti?" Pennyman repeated.

"Yes. Albanian chap. Top-notch physicist. Smuggled himself out of his country and made his way to Canada. Nobody heard from him for months—but just recently he secretly contacted our government. Seems he has something to sell."

"What is it?" asked Hager.

"He calls it a 'sonic boomer,'" Rhime replied. "Supposedly this thing—it's about the size of a large hunting rifle—can emit an ultrason-

ic beam in a thin line, like a laser. The beam, so Vrioti claims, is capable of disrupting the atomic structure of whatever it's aimed at. The target explodes, much the same as if it were blasted with dynamite."

"Sounds fishy to me," Pennyman growled.

"Our scientists said the same thing," Rhime acknowledged. "However, they didn't completely rule out the possibility that such a weapon could be made. The CIA was contacted to conduct an investigation. But because they felt that an element of trickery might be involved, they turned the problem over to Special Effects."

"Let me get this straight." Pennyman shifted his bulk in the chair, which creaked alarmingly. "You want me to take this . . . this kid with me into the wilds of Canada to contact a man I've never seen and check out a weapon I don't even understand."

"It's not all that bad," Rhime said. "Just see whether or not the sonic boomer really works. If it does, make Vrioti an offer. You're authorized to go as high as two hundred thousand dollars for the prototype, plus any plans. If the bargaining goes higher than that, contact me by radio for further instructions. Oh, and one more thing, Pennyman . . ."

"Yeah?" Pennyman said tersely.

"Before you leave, why not get your suit cleaned and pressed. And that shirt could use a laundering. New shoes, maybe? As for the tie, well . . ."

Rhime was still going on as the door clicked shut behind the retreating bulk of Pennyman, who was pushing Hager urgently in front of him.

Thirty-six hours later, Hager found himself seated next to Gregg, the pilot who was winging them across the Canadian wilderness. Behind them was Pennyman, alternately cursing the tiny seat into which he was forced to shoehorn his huge body, and demanding that Gregg fly higher above the tall spruce trees that seemed to glide by too close to the seaplane's pontoons. Hager marveled at the manner in which Pennyman had been able to reduce his plaid hunting shirt and khaki pants, bought new only the previous day, to a state of studied sloppiness.

Gregg pointed downward with an index finger and banked the plane, bringing a loud groan from Pennyman. "That's the end of Nichicum Lake," the pilot shouted over the roar of the engine. "The cabins are only a couple of miles down the south shore."

Setting the plane down on the

placid surface of the lake, Gregg taxied to within a hundred yards of the shore, where he switched off the engine. "Don't dare get any closer," he said. "Too many submerged rocks and logs in there."

A canoe shot out from shore, a single man paddling it with long, sure strokes. Moments later Pennyman felt it bump against the starboard pontoon. Looking through the plane's small side window, he noted the swarthy complexion of the paddler.

Reaching past Hager, Pennyman opened the door in the side of the plane. "Are you from Dr. Vrioti, Injun?" he called.

"That's right. Name's Joe Crow. And you'd be Pennyman. Rhime was sure right about you."

"Why, what did he say?"

"Told me you was a fat slob. I dunno but what I'll have to make two trips just to get you to shore."

When Pennyman climbed into the canoe after Hager and the gear, the craft's gunwales sank to within a few inches of the water's surface. Gingerly the Indian began paddling toward shore. Behind them the plane's engine roared as Gregg prepared for takeoff.

Vrioti met them at the crude dock which stuck out from the shore. "I am so glad you came, Mr. Pennyman," he said in a thickly accented voice. "Joe will take you up

to the cabins and make you comfortable."

"Fine," Pennyman said. "Then we can get right down to business. About this gun of yours, I mean."

"The sonic boomer can wait," replied Vrioti. "Get to know the beauties of Canada in the summer. Perhaps a bit of fishing."

"Doc, I'm a city boy," rumbled Pennyman. "The sooner I get away from these trees and rocks, the better I'll like it."

"You should try spending your life locked up in a laboratory performing experiments, the only purpose of which is to improve a dictator's weaponry." Vrioti smiled. "You would soon learn to appreciate the out-of-doors."

"The fact is," he went on, "there is a part of my weapon which has ceased to function properly. Until it is replaced, there can be no test."

"Just name it," Pennyman said. "I'll radio a request back to Rhime and he'll have whatever you need up here in a matter of hours."

Vrioti shook his head. "You don't understand, Mr. Pennyman. My sonic boomer is not made with conventional parts. Each one must be constructed by hand. Naturally, should your government decide to purchase it, I will work very closely with your electronics firms in showing them how the parts can be mass-produced."

"Yeah, sure. About how long will it take you to make this gimmick you need, Doc?"

"Two days . . . perhaps three. Forgive me, Mr. Pennyman, but time means so little here in the wilderness."

The larger of the two cabins set among the spruce trees was used by Vrioti as a laboratory. Joe Crow took Hager and Pennyman to the other and showed them the bunks where they would sleep.

"Tell me," Pennyman said to the Indian after his gear had been stowed, "is Vrioti ever . . . er . . . disturbed up here?"

"I don't get you," said Joe Crow. "What I mean is, Vrioti used to be a big scientific type in Albania. I doubt the Albanian government took too kindly to his escape. Isn't there just a possibility they'd send somebody looking for him?"

"Nobody knows where he is."
"Don't count on that," Pennyman said.

Joe Crow stepped to the door of the cabin, taking a holstered .38 pistol from its place on the wall. "Let 'em come. I think I can handle any trouble. Look." He pointed to a downed tree nearly a foot in diameter on the far side of the clearing. Then he strapped the gun belt carefully about his hips. "See that little knot about a foot from the thick end?" he said.

Even as Pennyman was focusing on the knot, there was a blur of movement, and the revolver seemed to jump into Joe Crow's hand. Two quick shots rang out.

"If either of them shots is more'n an inch from that knot, I'll eat this gun, holster and all," Joe Crow boasted.

"You're handy with that gun, all right," Pennyman said. "Now let me try."

Drawing the Magnum from its spring holster, Pennyman wrapped one huge hand about it, steadying the wrist with the other hand. In the little room the tremendous roar of the exploding cartridge made both men wince involuntarily. "Now let's look at that tree," Pennyman said, ignoring the ringing in his ears.

A silver dollar could have covered both the knot and the dimples where Joe Crow's shots had entered the wood. The entrance hole made by Pennyman's bullet was fractionally farther away. "You might take a look at the other side of the log while you're at it," Pennyman suggested.

As he stepped over the log, Joe Crow's eyes widened. His own bullets, he knew, were still in the wood. The exit hole made by Pennyman's hollow-pointed slug was nearly the size of his open hand.

The next two days were perfect.

The sun hung in a cloudless sky, while a gentle breeze rippled the waters of the lake. Joe Crow and Hager fished; Dr. Vrioti worked in his laboratory; and Pennyman lay in a crude hammock, brushing away the blackflies which seemed to consider him an endlessly bountiful banquet.

On the third day, a chilling wind sprang up from the north which shook the huge trees, and there was a hint of rain in the air. It was on this day that Dr. Vrioti announced his sonic boomer was ready to be tested.

Before the test, however, Vrioti sent Joe Crow to the smaller cabin with a message: Vrioti would like a private meeting with Pennyman in the laboratory.

As he plodded across the clearing, Pennyman pulled the collar of his jacket tight and grumbled at the chill wind which seemed to have no trouble in penetrating his thick clothing. "What kind of idiot weather is this to be having in the middle of summer?" he mumbled angrily.

Vrioti's laboratory was as neat and immaculate as the man himself. To the right of the door Pennyman entered was the two-way radio, the only contact with the outside world; on the left, Vrioti's cot. A potbellied stove was in the center of the single room, and beyond that,

against the far wall, was the workbench. The object on the bench immediately caught Pennyman's attention.

"My sonic boomer, Mr. Pennyman," Vrioti said proudly.

The gun was equipped with a regulation stock from a hunting

rifle; but here all similarity to ordinary weapons ended. The barrel was almost two inches in diameter, and near its end was a parabolic reflector with a groove cut from it to make sighting possible. Below the stock was mounted a clear plastic box containing printed circuit



boards, crudely-made electronic components, and what seemed like miles of thin copper wire.

"You will note there is no trigger," Vrioti said. "There is, of course, no need for one. A press on this button on the stock completes the necessary electrical circuit.

"Perhaps," he went on, "you would be interested in the principle on which this weapon operates. I'm sure you know that the proper musical note, given sufficient amplification, will shatter glass. I've found this same effect can be produced in any substance by ultrasonic vibrations which—"

"Hang on, Doc." Pennyman held up a meaty hand. "You're talking to the wrong guy. I'm no scientist—just a messenger boy who's gonna try and buy this gadget. If it works, that is."

"It will work, Mr. Pennyman. Get your young friend, and we'll be off for a little target practice."

Pennyman returned to his cabin and told Hager to dress warmly. "Where's Joe Crow?" he asked.

"He went out for some moss to plug the cracks in the cabin walls," Hager replied.

"I hope he finds something. No telling what kind of animals could sneak in here during the night."

The hike to Vrioti's "target range" was nearly a mile, all of it uphill, away from the lake. Penny-

man, sweating in spite of the cold wind, was thankful that the wind was at his back.

"We're here, Mr. Pennyman," Vrioti said finally.

"I hope so, Doc. Because I don't care what you're selling, I'm not climbing down there." At his feet the ground dropped away sharply, forming a deep gorge. On the far side of the gorge, which Pennyman estimated to be about two hundred yards across, an avalanche had cut out a wide swath through the underbrush from the rim to the bottom. Huge rocks and downed trees were mixed with the rubble.

"There are some of the effects of my weapon," Vrioti said.

Pennyman shook his head. "Not good enough, Doc. That landslide could just as easily have been started with a pick and shovel. I want to see that boomer thing of yours in action."

"And so you shall. Do you see that tree about a quarter of the way down the slope over there? The one with its top broken off?"

Pennyman nodded.

"Now watch."

Vrioti cuddled the gun to his shoulder. Twisting his right elbow upward, he pressed the small red button. A soft humming came from the box underneath the stock.

There was a dull "whump" from across the valley. Both Pennyman

and Hager stared wide-eyed at the shattered remains of what had once been the solid trunk of a tree. A small cloud of smoke was quickly wiped away by the wind.

"Perhaps, Mr. Hager, you would care to try it," Vrioti said with a smile. "The boulder there—the big one with the flat side. Here, try your luck."

He passed the gun to Hager, who took it uneasily. He aimed and touched the button. As the humming began, Vrioti nervously ran a hand across his brow. The explosion was sharper this time, and the huge rock shattered into four unequal pieces.

"And finally you, Mr. Pennyman. I can well understand your government's skepticism concerning my weapon. But surely you can't deny the evidence of your own eyes. How's your marksmanship? Think you can hit the downed log at the top of the cliff?"

"I generally hit what I aim at," growled Pennyman. He steadied the sonic boomer while Vrioti clutched his hat against the rising wind. A hum, a roar, and the log was reduced to a shower of sticks floating through the air in languid arcs.

"There you have it, gentlemen," Vrioti said. "And now, as it looks as if rain is imminent, I suggest we get back to the cabins. We'll have to

get our own supper; Joe Crow has gone to visit some friends up the lake."

Gently, he took the sonic boomer from Pennyman. "There is just one order of business before we return," he went on. Quickly he walked to the edge of the gorge and stepped onto an outcropping of rock. Gripping the sonic boomer by the end of the stock like a club, he brought it high over his head. Then, before either Pennyman or Hager could stop him, he pounded the weapon down onto the sharp edge of the stone. The plastic box shattered, and transistors, capacitors, and other electronic parts spewed out, dribbling down into the gorge.

Again and again Vrioti beat the gun against the rock until it was nothing but a twisted mass of wood and metal. Finally he flung it out over the gorge. It seemed to float in space for a moment and then plunged downward.

Pennyman heard it strike something hard far below. "What in hell was that all about?" he asked in exasperation. "There's nobody that'll buy your gadget in the condition it's in now, Doc."

"I'll explain when we return," Vrioti said softly. "Now, let us go. As it is, we'll be wet before we reach the cabins."

Thirty minutes later, Pennyman was jamming his thick legs into dry

pants and cursing loudly: "It's all Rhime's fault!" he bellowed at Hager, who was watching the beating rain sluice down across the windows. "He should have figured this Vrioti was a screwball. First he wants to sell us a gun, and then he pounds it to pieces. Dammit, I oughtta—"

There was a rapping at the cabin door. Pennyman and Hager exchanged worried glances. "C'mon in," Pennyman said finally.

Vrioti entered, rain streaming from his yellow oilskins. "Now we will bargain," he said quietly.

"Bargain? What bargain?" snarled Pennyman. "Your bargaining power is lying up there in the gorge, all busted into junk."

"But you agree the sonic boomer worked just the way I said it would?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess so. Only—"

"I built one such weapon," Vrioti went on. "I can build another."

"You mean you're willing to give us the plans?" asked Pennyman, brightening.

"There is only one set of plans." Vrioti gently tapped his head with an index finger. "They are here."

"Oh," Pennyman shrugged. "Great. We'll cut off your head and send it to Rhime."

"That," Vrioti said, "was almost what I had in mind. I am aware, Mr. Pennyman, that you were au-

thorized to offer a great deal of money for my weapon. But whatever amount you offer, I reject it. I want something else."

"Yeah? What?"

"I ask asylum in your great country. I ask protection from those who will one day find me, no matter where I hide. In return, I am prepared to supervise the construction of another sonic boomer. It would make me most happy to present it to your military leaders in return for their great gift of a life of freedom."

"Ah," breathed Pennyman. "Now I've got it. You figured if you busted that gun, we'd have to take you back with us."

"Exactly. It's a wonderful bargain for your country. In return for caring for me, you receive a weapon of almost limitless potential. All you have to do is take me on the plane with you, and great honor is yours for bringing off this coup. Any sane man would leap at the opportunity at once."

"I'll give it some thought," Pennyman said. "Let me sleep on it."

The following morning dawned bright and clear. A nervous Hager was up at dawn. Pennyman snored and snorted in a heavy sleep until almost noon.

"I'm dying," Pennyman finally groaned, opening his eyes. "Every muscle in my body aches." Gin-

gerly he reached a sitting position, shaking his head like a groggy prizefighter.

"Get Gregg on the radio," he told Hager in a fuzzy voice. "Tell him to fly up here and take us out of this godforsaken place."

"With Vrioti?" asked Hager.

"Sure. We might as well have something to show for the trip."

Two days later, Hager and Pennyman were ushered into Sherman Rhime's office. "Tuck in your shirt-tail, Pennyman," Rhime said without preamble. "If it's possible, you look worse than you did when you left here. Where have you left Vrioti?"

"Over at the Immigration Office. They'll keep him thrashing around in red tape until it's time to pick him up again."

"Very well, let's get to your report. As the new man, Mr. Hager, you get to go first."

"The whole thing went off almost exactly as planned," Hager said crisply. "Of course we couldn't bring back the sonic boomer itself, but with Dr. Vrioti's know-how, I'm sure another can be constructed and—"

Both Pennyman and Rhime emitted similar groans of anguish. In surprise, Hager looked from one to the other.

"You had a whole week, Pennyman," said Rhime, shaking his head.

"Couldn't you manage to teach him something in that time?"

"Hager," Pennyman said, as if he were talking to a child, "you're in Special Effects. Our job is to trick the enemy and to keep them from tricking us. If the government had been in any way convinced that the sonic boomer was genuine, we'd never have been called in."

"You mean the gun really doesn't work? But I saw—"

"You saw a toy that buzzed and a few rocks and trees exploding. But didn't it occur to you that Vrioti was picking our targets for us? It was an illusion, Hager. A magic trick."

"How can you be so blasted sure of that?"

"Because, Hager, I didn't play Vrioti's little game the way he wanted me to. When it was my turn to shoot, I aimed a good thirty feet to the right of that log he pointed out. It didn't seem to make any difference. The log exploded just the same."

Hager stared at the older man, his mouth opening and closing silently. "But . . . but why?" he asked finally.

"You might have asked yourself that while you were in Canada," Rhime said. "You've still got a lot to learn, Hager."

"Vrioti is a top physicist," added Pennyman. "I'm really a little in-

sulted that he thought we'd fall for his little game. He'd been out of his country for several months, and yet there's no evidence that his government was even looking for him. Therefore, it's possible they wanted him on the loose. Why? Do you remember what Vrioti said just after we arrived? About the parts for the sonic boomer?"

"I-I think so," Hager said, frowning. "He said all the parts were handmade. He'd have to be put in contact with electronics firms in this country to have them manufactured."

"In other words, Hager, he'd pretty much have the run of any electronics firm in the country. These firms have government contracts, Hager. They do top-secret work—work that Vrioti could comprehend and that his government would give their eyeteeth to get information about."

"You mean they'd really show him . . . everything?" Hager asked in surprise.

"A superscientist who'd proved his loyalty by defecting? I don't think he'd have had any trouble at all. And by the time we found out his weapon didn't work, he'd be out of the country, on his way home."

"But how did he bring off that business with the test of the sonic boomer?" Hager's face was a study in confusion. "I mean those targets

exploded as if . . . as if . . ." Suddenly a great light seemed to go on in Hager's mind. "As if they were loaded with dynamite!"

"At last," sighed Pennyman. "The little wheels in that brain of yours are beginning to go around in the right way. That's exactly the way it was rigged. On a clear day the smoke of the explosion might have drifted back to us. One whiff would have given the whole scheme away. That's why Vrioti waited until a day when there was a good stiff wind that would be at our backs when we fired, so that the smoke would be blown away from us. He even lucked out on the weather. The rain was a good excuse to bring us back to the cabin without a close examination of the targets, even if we'd wanted to risk our necks by climbing down into that gorge. Then, of course, after the test he broke his little toy so we couldn't examine it either."

"But this is just supposition on your part, isn't it?" Hager asked. "I mean you really don't have any proof."

"Yeah," said Pennyman. "I do. That last night, while you were pounding your ear and having sweet dreams about getting a medal for bringing back the sonic boomer, I hiked back up the mountain and across that gorge. I was scared stiff climbing down in the dark. It took

almost two hours, but I finally made it. When I got there, I picked up some samples from those targets we shot at. I was real beat when I got back, and it was almost dawn. That's why I wasn't as anxious as you were to get up that morning."

Reaching into his pocket, Pennyman brought out some bits of wood and rock. "I had our lab look at all the pieces I brought back," he said. "These are just a few of them. In bits of all three—the tree, the boulder, and the log—they found traces of fuller's earth and waxed paper forced into them by the blast."

"I still don't get—"

"Hager, one form of dynamite is made of three parts of nitroglycerin to one part of fuller's earth. The mixture is packed into tubes of waxed paper to keep it from crumbling. The lab boys are willing to swear that all three targets were blasted by dynamite, not by the sonic boomer."

"And those chunks of rock and wood are going to help send Vrioti to prison," Rhime said. "I'll bet his government won't be too happy about that. There is just one more

thing, Pennyman. How were the blasts timed so perfectly? How could Vrioti have set them off without your noticing anything?"

"Easy. Vrioti didn't set them off. He just gave the signal. When he fired, he raised his elbow. For Hager, he wiped his brow. He adjusted his hat when my turn came. On the other side of the gorge was Joe Crow, who'd been missing all day, with three detonators and a pair of field glasses. When he got the signal he just set off the proper charge."

"Do you know this, or are you guessing?" Hager asked.

"I know. I found him camped there that night when I went back for a look at the targets."

"You're lucky he didn't kill you," Hager said. "He's pretty swift with that gun of his."

"Oh, he was good," Pennyman said softly. "Real good."

He drew back his jacket and took the .357 Magnum from its holster. Flipping out the cylinder, he poured the six cartridges into his hand. Three of them had been fired.

"Almost as good as I was."



The end result is what counts—not how one reaches it.



Paul Dixon stood looking at the woman whose face he had sketched and painted a thousand times, the woman he had thought he would never see again—the woman who had almost, but not quite, become Mrs. Paul Dixon, three long and painful years ago.

She was framed in the open doorway of his combination studio and apartment, and she looked very small and very frightened. She wore a simple, dark blue dress and a string of white beads around her throat, and her red-rust hair was tangled, as if she had been walking or riding in a heavy wind. Her green eyes were wide and unblinking, and Dixon saw the stark fear in them—and something else that he could not read.

As he held the door open, there was the familiar constriction of his chest, and the hot, aching, empty feeling in the core of his stomach, and the fever-weakness in his legs—all the signs, all the emotions, of a love that for him had never dimmed in the slightest.

He stood very still, looking at her, touching her with his eyes. Her face had changed in three years. There were pain lines at the corners of her eyes, and the laughing curve of her mouth had been transformed into a tired, bitter line; but she would always be beautiful to him.

"Paul," she said, and there was pleading in her voice. Her hands,

held stiffly at her sides, were trembling.

Dixon forced his feet to move, and he stood aside. She passed him, walking slowly, robotlike, but with her head held high and erect. She went directly to the couch on the opposite side of the livingroom and sat there, knees together, hands folded in her lap like a little girl.

He closed the door, listening to the pounding of his heart. As he crossed the room and stood above her, wiping his paint-stained hands

by Bill
Pronzini

abstractedly on the smock he wore, there were many things he wanted to say. He wanted to tell her of his loneliness, the uselessness of the time since she had broken their engagement, since he had last seen her. He wanted to sit beside her, put his arms about her, and comfort her with soft, tender words; but when he finally found his voice, he could only say, "Why did you come, Erin? Why, after all this time?"

"Paul, I . . . I had nowhere else . . ."

"You're upset. What is it, Erin?"

"Larry," she said. "It's Larry."

Larry, Dixon thought. Larry Garrett—Erin's husband—the man who had destroyed his own union with Erin, who had cajoled and glibly talked her out of marrying Paul Dixon, a poor, struggling artist with little future, a cliché, a nobody, and into marrying wealth and stability and position. Larry Garrett, the handsome real estate speculator, the suave, budding politician, the calculating and amoral pillar of the community who got what he wanted one way or another.

Dixon swallowed into a dry throat. "What about Larry?" he said.

Erin's mouth trembled, and he saw tears welling in her green eyes, then spilling down over her cheeks, as she sat rigid. "Paul," she said, and her voice was so soft he could scarcely hear the words. "Larry's dead."

There was silence in the room. Even the clock above the mantel seemed to have stopped its quiet ticking. Dixon stood absolutely motionless, staring at her, watching her tears stream down. "What?" he said. "What did you say?"

"It's true," Erin said. "Larry's dead. I killed him."

"Killed him? Erin, what are you—"

"We had a fight," she told him. "A terrible fight. I . . . I hit him. I picked up the poker from the fire-

place in the library and I hit him with it. I killed him, Paul."

"Why?" Dixon asked numbly. "Why?"

"My marriage to Larry was a nightmare, Paul," she whispered. "I thought I knew him when I left you for him—I thought I loved him. But I was so unbelievably wrong, so foolish, so naive. He was ruthless. He didn't love me, he only wanted a showpiece to complete his image, to further his ambitions. And there were other women—an endless succession of other women. He would tell me about them, in great detail. I . . . I just couldn't take any more, Paul."

"Why didn't you leave him?"

"I wanted to, almost from the beginning. But he wouldn't give me a divorce, and he threatened me. He said he would kill me if I ever tried to leave him."

"Erin, Erin—"

"Don't say it, Paul. You warned me about him. You knew the way he was from the beginning."

"Yes. I knew."

She looked up at him and her eyes were still moist, the imploring eyes of a child. "What am I going to do, Paul?"

Dixon shook his head weakly. "I don't know."

"I . . . I'm afraid to call the police."

"Why? You can tell them it was

self-defense," he told her firmly.

"But it *wasn't*, Paul, not really, and they'd know it. I'm not a good liar. They'd get the truth out of me, and then they'd put me in jail. I couldn't stand that. All those bars, those locked doors—it would be just like my life with Larry. Oh, Paul, I'm so afraid!"

She seemed about to collapse. Dixon sat quickly beside her, and she leaned against him, crying pitifully, as he circled her with his arms.

"I wanted so much to be free of him, and now I can never be free. Even in death, he—" She broke off, and her face began to change. "Paul, help me. Please help me!"

"What can I do? Erin, you know I love you, that I've always loved you—but what can I do?"

"I don't want to go to jail. I'd die in jail. I'd wither up and die."

The fear, the torment, was strong and volatile in her voice, and as he sat there with the warmth and tenseness of her beneath his hands, Dixon felt a torment of his own raging within him. Her fear of jail, of a prison even more terrifying than the one Larry Garrett had walled her into, was a cancerous presence inside her; he could not allow it to happen to her, he knew that. Yet there was nothing he could do.

Or was there?

Yes. Yes, there was one thing he

could do. He could sacrifice himself to save her.

He was nothing without Erin. The past three years had been empty and dead, and the future held little change. He had no fear of prison, and there was no capital punishment in this state; he could plead manslaughter, which carried a light sentence. When he got out in a year or two, there was the hope—something he had not had in three years—that a grateful, perhaps even loving, Erin would at long last become his wife.

Dixon knew he was going to do it. He *had* to do it—for Erin, and for himself.

He looked down at her, and gently brushed the red-rust hair from her forehead. Then he put his hand under her chin and tenderly lifted her head. "Erin," he said, "it's all right. It's going to be all right, now."

"Paul . . ."

"Listen to me carefully. I'm going out now. I want you to stay here for a half hour after I leave, and then I want you to get into your car and drive straight home. Do you understand?"

"Home? Paul, I can't—"

"Yes, you can. Now promise me you'll do as I ask."

"But where are you going?"

"Trust me," Dixon said. "Just trust me. Will you make that prom-

ise? That's all I want you to do."

She nodded mutely.

He stood, smiled at her reassuringly, then removed his smock, put on a sport jacket, and left the apartment.

Downstairs, he took his car from the garage and drove across town mechanically, as he thought about what he would say to the police.

"Garrett and I had a fight," he would tell them. "I knew he had been mistreating Erin, and I went there to confront him with the knowledge, beg him to give her a divorce. We had words, and then I picked up the fireplace poker and hit him. I killed him."

It was possible that, in spite of her fear of prison, Erin would come forward to tell the truth, but it would be too late then. The police would believe she and Dixon had been lovers, and that she was trying to protect him—not the other way around. They would believe *him*.

Erin would be free, and Paul Dixon could hope again.

He reached the Garrett home twenty minutes later. It was in Beachwood, an exclusive section of the city nestled in the foothills to the north. The house itself was large, dark, two-story Colonial, tastefully landscaped, surrounded by green lawn, shrubbery, shade trees, a lush garden in purples and yellows and pinks. It was affluence,

the material possession of a cold and truculent man, and it was built on the shattered hopes and shattered dreams of those who had stood in Larry Garrett's way.

Dixon parked under the porte cochere near the main entrance. He stood there for a moment. *The library*, Erin had said.

It took him only a few minutes to find it. The French doors stood wide open. He took a deep breath and stepped inside.

It was a huge room. The fireplace was across from him, the hearth black-and-white checkered stone, the mantelpiece of dark, polished wood. The furniture was old and leather-upholstered, meant to give the impression of comfort and relaxation, but the room only looked cold and dark and remote. Dixon knew Erin must have hated this room, and at the same time that it must have been Garrett's favorite.

He went deeper inside, to the middle of the library, and stood with his eyes circuiting. A frown touched his forehead. He heard a sound behind him—and when he turned he felt as if he were looking at a ghost.

The man coming through one of the doorways to the left, with one thick and yellow-haired hand holding a wet washcloth to the side of his head, teeth pressed together and

eyes squeezed almost shut in silent pain, was Larry Garrett.

Dixon stood immobile, staring. At first he felt an overwhelming relief. Garrett wasn't dead! Erin hadn't killed him!

Garrett lifted his head as he entered the library and saw him standing there. He stopped, returning Dixon's stare. "Well, I'll be damned," he said in a voice flecked with pain. "Paul Dixon. What the hell are *you* doing here?"

Dixon did not know what to say. What can you say to a man you expected to be lying dead with his skull crushed? He could only shake his head numbly.

Garrett went to a chair near the fireplace and sank into it, wincing as the back of his head touched the chair. He was a big man, an athlete once, his yellow hair grown longer than Dixon remembered it, down into the collar of his shirt. The pouting mouth was puffy and the stomach paunchy from too much expensive liquor and too much exotic food. Dixon thought of him with Erin, and the thought sent a repulsive shudder through his body. He put it out of his mind.

Garrett looked up at him then, almost as if seeing him for the first time in the shock of the pain he was suffering. "How did you get in here, Dixon?"

"The French doors. They were



open, so I came in," Dixon told him.

"Well, what do you want?"

Dixon could not respond.

A small, cruel smile came onto Garrett's mouth. "Of course," he said. "Erin. She must have gone to you after she ran out of here."

"No," Dixon said, too quickly. "No, I—"

"Where is she, Dixon? Your apartment?"

SACRIFICE

"No, of course not," Dixon said.

"The hell she isn't," Garrett said.

He laughed, and it was an ugly sound in the stillness of the room.

"It must have been a shock, eh, Dixon? Seeing her after all these years. I can picture the whole scene. She thought she killed me, isn't that it? So you came around to check. You're not disappointed, are you?"

Yes, Dixon thought. *Yes!* That first feeling of relief had fled now. He wanted Garrett to be dead. He wanted him to be lying on that floor, with his head crushed and bleeding—but he said nothing.

“Well, she damned near did finish me off,” Garrett said. “Look at my neck. I’ll carry a scar there for the rest of my life.”

He took the washcloth away, stained red with his blood, and Dixon saw the open wound on his neck and the side of his head. He asked slowly, “What are you going to do?”

“Do? I’m not going to *do* anything.”

“You’re not . . . calling the police?”

“The police?” Garrett laughed again. “No, Dixon, I’m not calling the police. I’ll settle with Erin in my own way.”

Dixon felt anger boiling in his chest. His hands were clenched into fists. This was the real Larry Garrett sitting there before him, the vain, unfeeling, malicious, vengeful man that hid beneath the smiling public facade. He had known the real Larry Garrett from the moment he met him that summer three years previously, but Erin would not listen to him then. She had seen only the strength of Garrett, the virile handsomeness, and nothing of the inner man.

Dixon did not know until that moment how much he really hated Larry Garrett.

“Get out of here, Dixon,” Garrett said to him. “Get out of my house and don’t come back. And if Erin’s not home in one hour, I *will* call the police. Do you understand that?”

The poker was lying on the floor at the base of the fireplace. Dixon saw it there, the tip covered with Garrett’s blood, and the palms of his hands were sweating. His heart thundered in his chest, and his mouth was dry. He could not take his eyes off that red poker . . .

“Larry!”

The sound of that single, horror-filled cry echoed through the cold, dark room. Dixon whirled—and Erin was there, standing just inside the French doors, one slim white hand pressed over her mouth and her green eyes wide with disbelief and terror.

She had left the apartment too soon, perhaps had sensed that this was where Dixon intended to go; and when she had come in, she had seen Garrett sitting there in his chair, alive, not dead as she had thought.

Garrett was on his feet now, looking at her. The savage smile was back on his lips. “Well,” he said, “the potential murderess returns. Only I’m alive, Erin. You didn’t quite do the job on me.”

He started toward her, holding the bloody washcloth in his hand, holding it out for her to see, moving slowly, impaling her with his eyes. She was frozen there, unable to move; a pathetic little whimper came from her throat.

Dixon reacted then, because in that moment he knew how Garrett intended to deal with Erin—that he would taunt her with what she had almost done to him, break her remaining spirit, whip her into submission the way a cruel man whips a dog into obedience. He couldn't let that happen, any more than he could let Erin go to prison. He rushed forward, caught up the poker lying near the fireplace, and spun toward Garrett.

The poker slashed down. There was a dull, splitting sound and Garrett fell heavily to the floor almost at Erin's feet.

Her hand flew up to her mouth to choke back a scream. Momentarily, her widened eyes rested on the dead body of her husband, on the bloodied substance that flowed from the crack in his skull; then she recoiled and ran to one side of the

room, staring at the white, panting face of Paul Dixon.

Dixon felt strangely calm. He had just killed a man in cold blood, and yet he felt nothing at all in the way of remorse. "I had to do it," he said aloud to Erin. "I did it for you. You won't have to face *either* prison, now."

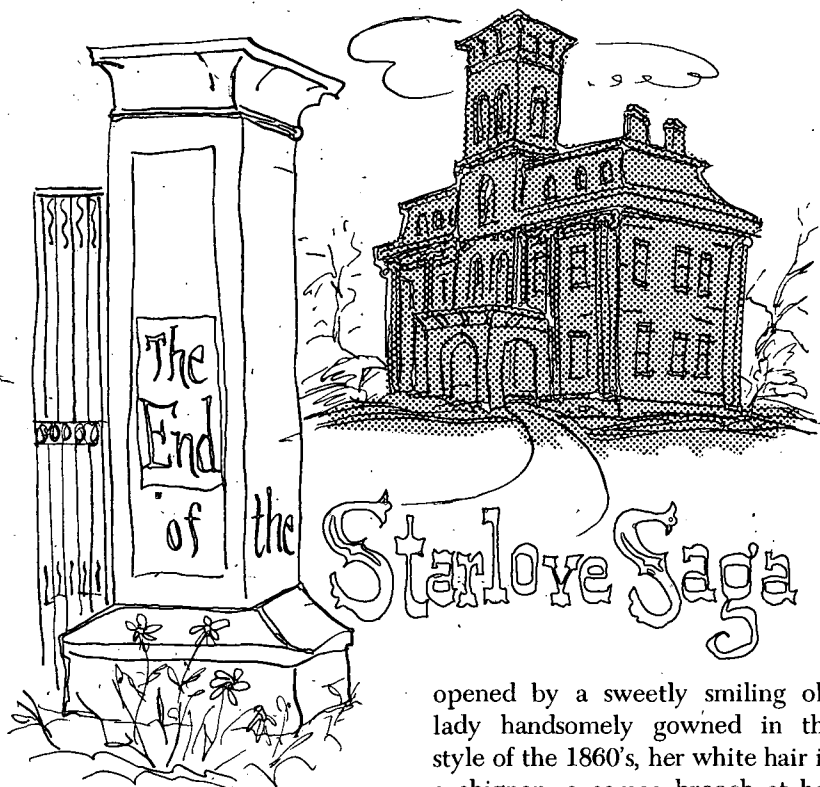
He dropped the poker, turned away and walked toward the phone on the far side of the library. When he reached it, he took a deep, tremulous breath; then he dialed the number of the police, arranging in his mind exactly what he would say.

He did not see the look in Erin's bright green eyes as she watched him, the look of a woman who has changed more than physically—a woman who, after three years of living with a brutal and ruthless man, has become brutal and ruthless herself.

He did not hear her soft sigh of relief that Larry Garrett was at last dead; and that, even though her premeditated blow earlier had failed to accomplish its intended purpose, the end result would be just as she had planned it.



True patriotism is not dead; it is just a matter of picking the right war.



Hoxley Starlove and his girlfriend Alma Jean arrived like battle-weary refugees at the Starlove place, too exhausted to show any surprise when the door was

opened by a sweetly smiling old lady handsomely gowned in the style of the 1860's, her white hair in a chignon, a cameo brooch at her throat, and a lace fan held demurely in her hand.

"I'm so terribly sorry," announced this amiable relic, "but we don't usually open the house till

three. Summer hours are posted on the gate . . .”

Neither Hoxley nor Alma Jean had paid any attention to the sign, nor had they any intention of trudging back to their broken-down convertible and going away, for the very simple reason that they had no place to go and less means to get there. They were stone-broke and couldn't have afforded the cheapest motel room in Winchester.

Hoxley turned on his most ingratiating smile, his “twenty-one tooth salute,” as he called it, which seldom failed to impress those widows and spinsters he had singled out to bilk. At the same time, he began

wiping his forehead with a soiled handkerchief and exercising that smidgen of Starlove charm that tempered somewhat the Hoxley grossness.

“Why, you-all must be Great-Aunt Lorena. I'm Hoxley Starlove, and this little lady is my wife, Alma Jean. We were passin' through Washington and thought we'd stop by and pay our respects.”

It would have been more accurate to have said “chased out of” rather than “passing through,” but he was mistaken if he thought Miss Lorena's expression revealed some clairvoyant-knowledge of his delinquencies; it merely betrayed the uncertainty passing through her mind as she observed the young man from behind her fan. There were branches of the Starlove clan that had withered and branches that had been hacked off in disgrace, and it took a while to recollect to which branch this grinning twig might belong. His eyes were pure Starlove, but the nose and chin were unmistakably Hoxley.

“My goodness me,” exclaimed Alma Jean, suddenly perking up and taking her cue from Hoxley, “you must be able to *see* all the way to Washington from way up there in that tower.”

It was not the sort of white-columned mansion she had envisioned from Hoxley's description (he



hadn't bothered to tell her he'd never been near the place), but it was even more imposing. Old Colonel Starlove had fancied a Tuscan villa more than a Greek temple, and that's what he had built: a red-brick fortress of a place with handsomely bracketed windows, projecting eaves, wide, arched loggia, and a central tower from whose windows one could see, if not all the way to Washington, at least across the fields and apple orchards of the Shenandoah Valley to the hazy battlements of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Miss Lorena, although vaguely apprehensive of that Hoxley nose and chin, was too genteel a lady not to take pity on the couple. She invited them in.

To be invited into the Starlove mansion was to be ushered into the 1860's. Not a stick of furniture, not a lamp or clock or rug had been added to the original furnishings, and the sheet of music on the rosewood piano was the same one that had been there in the summer of 1862. Alma Jean, whose vocal pretensions had been disastrously exploded during a brief stint in a Pittsburgh nightclub, peeped curiously at the title: *When This Cruel War Is Over*.

The goggle-eyed pair could be forgiven for assuming that Miss Lorena might be the reigning local ec-

centric, and perhaps the old lady got some amusement from supporting this assumption longer than necessary, for it was not until they had been sitting for some time in the cool, high-ceilinged parlor that she ventured to explain about the museum.

"I was fair destitute, my dears. And then one day some Yankee tourists came by and begged me to let them see the inside of the house. That's when I got the idea. The house virtually was a museum already. Attics crammed with all sorts of War mementoes and trunks full of books and music and clothing. So I restored everything to the way it was in those dear old days and I dressed myself up like this, and put a notice on the gatepost down by the highway. Why, you'd be amazed at the number of tourists just clamoring to give me fifty cents—I charge fifty cents for each adult and let the children under eleven in free—to show them around the house and regale them with tales about the War. Of course, business has fallen off considerably since they put in the expressway. Still and all, I manage to take in enough to keep the tax collector happy." She looked fondly about the room. "Isn't it divine? Sometimes, when no one's around, I pretend it really is 1860. I really do believe if it weren't for the tourists

I'd lose all touch with the present. The past is so much less . . . agitating."

She leaned toward Alma Jean and whispered from behind her fan, "Do you know, my dear, even when visiting hours are over I still wear these clothes. I just don't feel decent anymore in short skirts."

Later, while Miss Lorena was preparing to welcome the tourists—of which so far there had been no sign—Alma Jean spoke her mind. "This joint gives me the creeps, Hoxley. And so does she. Put the bite on her, why don't you, and let's get out of here."

Hoxley was busy with his own private thoughts. "Don't get in a rush. The old girl's got a sweet little racket going here. Maybe there's something in it for us."

Changed into a faded but still dazzling ball gown, Miss Lorena reappeared and sat down by the front window from where she could see the lane that led to the highway, although not the highway itself. The gingerbread clock on the mantel chimed four, four-thirty, five. She began to fret. "I'm afraid we aren't going to have any guests today. What a pity! The weather's so fine."

Alma Jean glanced at Hoxley with a look that seemed to say, "So much for your sweet little racket."

Hoxley wasn't at all discouraged.

"Fewer tourists the better," he said later, with a mysterious smile.

"I don't get it," said Alma Jean. "First you call it a sweet little racket. Now you admit it's chicken feed."

"Sugar, your thinkin' cap came unraveled the day you were born. This old barn's a gold mine. Soon's I get a chance I'm gonna do a complete inventory: silver, jewels, antiques, clothes. The place is loaded with goodies."

"Well, you better hustle, sweetie. I get the distinct impression Miss Lorena ain't about to extend her hospitality much longer."

"Leave her to me, sugar. Just don't you go makin' any dumb fool remarks and spoil things, hear?"

Hoxley's perverted instincts were shrewd enough to spot Miss Lorena's weakness: she loved to talk and had no one to listen. Alone for too many years, she quickly fell victim to that sympathetic and attentive ear that Hoxley placed at her disposal, and the saga of the Starloves being virtually endless, she could hardly do it justice in only one evening. They were invited to spend the night.

It was all Hoxley needed. Once their battered and treasureless bags were unpacked it was not too difficult to get the visit prolonged. Living with Miss Lorena, however, turned out to be something less

than a picnic. It was the poverty of the cuisine, in fact, that soon brought out Alma Jean's inveterate spitefulness.

"Seems to me," she observed crankily, "you could sell some of these fancy dishes and buy a little more food and drink."

Hoxley shot her a withering glance, but Miss Lorena didn't take offense.

"My dear child, these fancy dishes are my stock-in-trade. Everything must be absolutely original or the tourists are going to feel cheated. I can't afford to part with a single one of my possessions. And one can get used to a meager diet if one tries. We all have a tendency to abuse our digestive systems. A little fasting is as good for the body as it is for the soul."

Alma Jean had never given much thought to her soul, and her plumpness and high blood pressure proved how seldom she practiced any austerities of the body.

Suddenly, Miss Lorena, whose gaze seldom strayed far from the front windows, spotted a station wagon stopping at the foot of the lane. She sprang up with a gleeful cry. "Tourists!" She rushed to peep around the red velvet curtains. "One, two, three, four! Four adults and three youngsters! Oh, it's going to be a *good* day." Then she fluttered her fan in sudden alarm. "Oh,

dear. You two had better run and hide. Or wait—better yet—pretend you're tourists. In the parlor now, quick like bunnies."

From the parlor they could hear Miss Lorena's greeting to the tourists.

"Welcome to Starlove Plantation. Isn't it a perfectly heavenly day? I am Miss Starlove and I'm delighted to see you-all. If the gentleman will kindly deposit the honorarium in that little silver tray, I'd be so glad to show you the house and recount a bit of its fascinating history. We have two other friends waiting in the parlor if you'd be so kind as to follow me."

Miss Lorena combined the roles of hostess and guide with exceeding charm and delicacy, so that the tourists experienced a quite uncanny sensation of having been transported a hundred years into the past. She spoke of the past, indeed, as if it were the present.

When the group was bade farewell, Miss Lorena slipped the fee out of the silver tray into her reticule and joined Hoxley and Alma Jean in the library, where they had feigned too great an interest to leave with the others.

"You mean you want us to traipse around this whole place listenin' to that spiel every time somebody comes?" Alma Jean was too aghast at this idea to speak tact-

fully or civilly to Miss Lorena.

Again, Hoxley gave her a murderous glare, and once more Miss Lorena merely smiled.

"No indeed, child. I'm sure it wouldn't be advisable for you to climb all those stairs."

"You bet your sweet life it wouldn't."

"I've a much jollier idea. We've got trunks full of old clothes upstairs. There's sure to be something there that would fit you both."

Alma Jean's mean little mouth tightened. "Clothes? Like you're wearin', I suppose?"

"Precisely."

"No, thanks."

"You'll be introduced as Starlove cousins from Richmond. You, Alma Jean, can be discovered sitting at the piano playing Stephen Foster melodies, while Hoxley helps me conduct the tours."

Hoxley did everything but kiss her cheek. "Aunt Lorena, you're a genius."

"Well, count me out," said Alma Jean. "It's hot enough around here without gettin' togged out like that."

Miss Lorena looked thoughtful. "I'm afraid I haven't the means to entertain house guests indefinitely, my dear. If you feel it might imperil your health to assist in our little masquerade, perhaps you and dear Hoxley might be happier else-

where. I do believe there are some very comfortable motels around Winchester."

Hoxley quickly applied oil to this spot of friction. "Alma Jean's a great little spoofer, Aunt Lorena. Pay no never-mind to her. Let's you and me go dig out those old clothes. I can't wait to see how I'd have looked a hundred years ago."

Obviously, he had a plan, but all he would disclose to Alma Jean was that step one had already been taken—they were settled, however tentatively, in the house.

Step two was taken about a fortnight later when Hoxley strolled down the lane after dark and removed the sign from the gatepost, tearing it into shreds and scattering the pieces among the dogwood. Luckily, Miss Lorena never ventured farther than the mailbox and rarely even that far, as she seldom received any mail, having willfully discouraged contact with the modern world, which included breaking off all communication with her distant relatives scattered throughout the South. If she left the house at all it was only to sit on the porticoed loggia in the cool hours of early evening.

As there had been only a faint trickle of tourists in the past two weeks, Miss Lorena was not suspicious when the trickle turned into a drought.

"And now comes step three," announced Hoxley to Alma Jean one night as they were getting ready for bed. "If it works, sugar, we're home free. If it doesn't we're back on the road again."

"So who cares? I'm sick of being a dummy in a waxworks. And old Madame Tussaud gives me the colly-wobbles."

"Be patient, sugar, and pay close attention. A lot's gonna depend on you from now on." The only weak point, his look implied, in the whole plan.

As the days passed with no sign of any tourists, Miss Lorena became more and more perplexed. "I simply don't understand it. And such marvelous weather, too."

Hoxley, chafing in his high collar and flannels, darted a quick look at Alma Jean. Rigged out in basque, chignon, and flowing muslin skirt, she waited, sullen-faced and perspiring, her fingers poised above the piano keys.

Speaking with great care, he said, "You might as well face up to it, Aunt Lorena. There ain't gonna be anyone else stoppin' till the War is over."

Alma Jean, on cue, plunged into a nervous rendition of *When This Cruel War Is Over*.

Miss Lorena gave Hoxley a momentarily startled look. "The War, Hoxley?"

Hoxley placed a gentle arm around the old lady's shoulders. "You may as well know, Aunt Lorena. I was in town this morning and heard the news. There was a great battle at Chancellorsville. Our boys won, but Jackson was killed."

Miss Lorena stared at him as if she were in a trance. Her lips slowly shaped the words: "Jackson? General Jackson? *Stonewall* Jackson?"

"Yes, Aunt Lorena. It's a great loss to the Cause."

Alma Jean was so nervous by now her fingers were simply blundering haphazardly along the keys.

"Oh, dear," whispered Miss Lorena, reaching into her reticule for her smelling salts. "What about Darcy?"

"Darcy's all right. His name wasn't on the casualty lists." Hoxley was glad he had paid close attention to Miss Lorena's reminiscences that first night. He grinned triumphantly at Alma Jean over the old lady's shoulder.

It worked far more easily than he had dared hope. With an air of infinite relief, Miss Lorena released her frail grip on the present and allowed herself to be pushed gently into the past she loved so dearly. Of course, it had been much more than a shot in the dark. Hoxley had been perceptive enough to spot those

frequent lapses and hints of mental confusion that indicated the drift of Miss Lorena's mind. All she had needed was that little helpful push.

Step four was taken soon after.

Hoxley had pretended to go into town for news and he came back with an anxious face. "President Davis has made an urgent appeal for funds. The Confederacy is in dire need. Everyone has been urged to contribute whatever they can."

"But we've nothing," groaned Miss Lorena. "We've no money at all."

"There's the silver, Aunt Lorena. The silver's worth a lot. But then—I don't suppose you'd want—"

"Oh, Hoxley, I would! For the Cause."

"You're very generous, Aunt Lorena." He kissed her cheek. "I'll take it into town tomorrow."

That night Alma Jean was looking perkier than she had in weeks, and acting more affectionately than she had in months. "Hoxley, sweetie, you're more of a scallawag than I ever thought."

"Sugar, this is just the beginning."

Alma Jean counted out the money once more. "Where you gonna put it?"

"Just don't you worry your pretty head about that."

Miss Lorena was only too willing to part with other treasures: china,

glassware, bric-a-brac, jewelry.

"Sugar, there just ain't no ca-boose in sight on this gravy train," crowed Hoxley, returning to the house every couple of days with a bulging wallet.

Now, Alma Jean was every bit as delighted as Hoxley at the turn of events, and although she could see no immediate reason why anything should interfere with this systematic looting of the Starlove estate, she was canny enough to foresee the possibility of two dangers. First, Miss Lorena might suddenly regain her sense of time. Anything might trigger it, in spite of their elaborate precautions, which went so far as to make sure Miss Lorena was in the house and Alma Jean thundering on the piano when jet planes were scheduled to pass over the area. Second, Alma Jean didn't trust Hoxley with all that money; she didn't trust him because she knew that he didn't trust her. If he did, he would have told her where he was hiding the money. It wouldn't be unlike Hoxley to ditch her and take off alone with the whole bundle.

"We've got enough, Hoxley," she would plead. "The longer we stay here the riskier it becomes. Let's take what we've got and split."

"Don't be stupid. Listen, she told me this place is willed to the state. I'm gonna work on her to change that will. I'm gonna talk her into

leavin' this place and everything in it to her dear devoted great-nephew Hoxley. We can't peddle all this big furniture till the place is ours."

"So what if she did change her will? She may be old but she's not about to fall into the grave."

Hoxley gave her a rough squeeze. "She'll fall into the grave, sugar, whenever I'm good and ready to dig it."

This really gave Alma Jean something to worry about; Hoxley had always been a skunk, but never a particularly violent skunk. Nevertheless, she knew he was perfectly sincere in what he threatened to do to Miss Lorena, and she was not at all sure he wouldn't decide to do the same thing to her. With that in mind she prepared a strategy of her own, the first item of which was to locate Hoxley's cache.

One afternoon not long after, when she and Miss Lorena were alone in the house, Alma Jean sprang the trap. She had a long talk with the old lady.

Miss Lorena listened, first with dismay, then with shocked incredulity. "I can't believe it!"

"I couldn't either, until I found the money."

"Where?"

"In a trunk in the tower room. I followed him last night when he thought I was asleep."

"And you saw the letter? From the Yankee colonel?"

"Of course. That's how I got onto it."

"I might have known! The Hoxleys were always treacherous, thieving varmints. One scandal after another. But spying for the Yankees! Selling my things to buy supplies for Yankee soldiers! Oh, the scamp!"

"That's just what he's been doing, Miss Lorena."

"Show me the money, Alma Jean."

Alma Jean led her up the narrow stairs into the tower room, and there, in a brassbound trunk, were the stacks of bills.

"He knew it wouldn't be discovered," said Miss Lorena. "I remember telling him I hadn't been up here in twenty years."

Alma Jean closed the trunk. "He'll be bringing the Yankees here any day now. Or else he'll take the money to them. We must stop him!"

"Can you shoot, my dear?"

Alma Jean tried not to smile. "You mean—kill him?"

"How else do you punish treason?"

"Have you got a gun?"

"Come with me."

In the attic Miss Lorena showed Alma Jean the long, rifled musket her Uncle Clement had used at Bull

Run. "Here's all we need." With surprising ease Miss Lorena bit open a paper cartridge, poured powder down the musket's barrel, slammed the bullet down with a ramrod, cocked the hammer, and set the percussion cap. "There. Ready to be fired. You'll have to do it, my dear. I might faint dead away."

Alma Jean didn't even bother to pretend to be squeamish. "He weighs a ton. Where can we bury him when it's done?"

"In the old rose garden, I should think."

When Hoxley came home that afternoon he was virtually in one door and out the other—feet first. Later, long after dark, Alma Jean came into the house, weary but high-spirited, and went up to bed humming a tune that sounded suspiciously like *Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground*.

She was up at dawn, packing her few belongings. Hoxley's empty suitcase would just about accommodate the money, and after a hasty breakfast she picked up the bag and started up the stairs to the tower room.

Halfway up she smelled smoke.

Her first thought was that the house was on fire; her second was that she must get the money and escape.

She rushed up the steps and burst

into the tower room to find Miss Lorena standing grimly over the open trunk watching flames consume the stacks of money.

Alma Jean gave a shriek and made a lunge for the last of the bundles.

Miss Lorena grappled her away. "Be careful! You'll get burned!"

"You old fool! What are you doing?"

"Burning it, of course. It's no earthly good to us. Don't you know the difference between Confederate currency and Federal? It's all Yankee money. Won't be worth the paper it's printed on when the War's over. Here! Stop that!"

Alma Jean was still trying to snatch the last bundle out of the trunk. Miss Lorena tugged at Alma Jean's skirt, whereupon the younger woman flew into a rage and while she struggled with Miss Lorena she screamed the truth into her ear, bawled out the whole cruel hoax, striking out at the same time with her fists. Then, just as she made a final maddened charge at Miss Lorena, the old lady stepped aside and Alma Jean went crashing through the long arched window, screaming all the way to the ground below.

Luckily, the earth had not settled too firmly over Hoxley; and Miss Lorena, frail as she was, managed to deposit the other corpse on top of him.

For weeks after that her mind was lost in a vast cloud of uncertainty, until finally she gave up the effort to perceive anything with clarity and allowed the hours and days to pass by without trying to attach them to any specific year.

It so happened that one afternoon several weeks after these events had taken place a ragtag bunch of young people came straggling up the lane and asked Miss Lorena for some drinking water. They regarded her archaic figure in its billowing skirts with a tolerant amusement devoid of cruelty and with an air of compassion at odds with their rather tattered, warlike appearance. Even the girls, Miss Lorena noted with dismay, wore pants, and the young men wore their hair to their shoulders. She assumed they were refugees, but as she'd had no news for weeks she didn't know if they were Yankees or Confederates, and thought it would be more discreet not to inquire.

"We're on our way to Washington to protest the War," said one of the young men.

She gladly gave them as much water as they could drink, after which they thanked her politely, rested a few minutes in the shade, and started off again. When they were at the foot of the lane she suddenly found her courage and hurried after them.

"Good luck!" she called out. "I do hope Mr. Lincoln listens to you."

They were too far away to hear. She sighed, and as she turned to go back up the lane she glanced at the gatepost and then paused and stared at it, a look of baffled uncertainty crossing her face as if there were something she couldn't quite recollect. Presently she looked down at her skirt and she fingered the brooch at her throat, and her mind opened and she smiled up at the clear blue sky.

For several minutes she stood there like that and then, still smiling, she walked slowly up the lane. When she got to the steps she paused once more, gazed back at the world for only a fleeting moment, then passed into the house and closed the door behind her.



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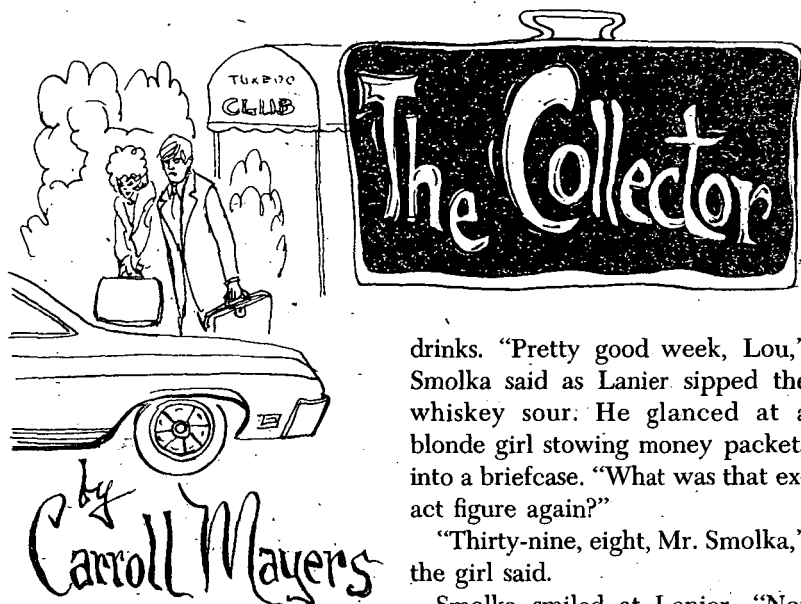
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What you hear is not always what you get.



The Tuxedo Club in upstate Lakeshore was Lou Lanier's last stop that night. Eddy Smolka, the manager, exhibited some surprise when Lanier came in alone.

"Duggan's laid up with a virus," Lanier explained. "Howe decided I could make the collection run alone."

Smolka nodded, led the way to his private office, fixed a brace of

drinks. "Pretty good week, Lou," Smolka said as Lanier sipped the whiskey sour. He glanced at a blonde girl stowing money packets into a briefcase. "What was that exact figure again?"

"Thirty-nine, eight, Mr. Smolka," the girl said.

Smolka smiled at Lanier. "Not bad, eh?"

The collector assented. "That makes a total of eighty-six thousand for the week." He accepted the briefcase from the girl, turned to leave.

Smolka stopped him. "You've got a passenger tonight."

Lanier frowned. "Uh uh," he told the manager. "You know Howe's nixed any riders on a collection run."

"He's OK'd this one," Smolka rejoined. He turned to the blonde. "Tell her Mr. Lanier is leaving."

Lanier blinked. "Her?"

"Monica Farris, the canary," Smolka said. "She's been bugging me to put in a word for her with Howe, to suggest he move her up to a spot at the Crystal. When I got his OK yesterday, she asked to wait and ride down with you tonight." He gave Lanier a wry look. "What's the matter, you afraid you won't keep your mind on business?"

The collector shrugged off the parry. "I just want to be sure. Howe's hell on routine."

Monica Farris was a moist-lipped redhead with wide green eyes. She had been the vocalist at the Tuxedo for some five weeks, during which period Lanier had exchanged a few pleasantries with her. As the collector locked her single suitcase and the Tuxedo briefcase in the car trunk with the other receipts of his trip, the girl settled quietly in the seat, rather withdrawn.

Under way, Lanier attempted small banter but soon realized his passenger was vaguely preoccupied. Finally, she broke in on a lame joke he was broaching.

"Lou, can we talk?"

"I thought we were."

"I mean, *really* talk. First, about you."

"What about me?"

"How long have you been working for Sam Howe?"

"Going on two years."

"And you're satisfied?"

The collector gave her a short look. "That's a relative word. It can mean different things to different people."

"Let's say, financially."

"You mean, how much is Howe paying me?"

She drew a breath. "It's none of my concern, I know. But, yes, that's what I mean."

Lanier spoke deliberately. "When I first joined the organization I was a bouncer in Howe's Logan Bay casino. Somehow or other, he took a fancy to me. After six months he moved me up to assistant barkeep, and after that, he took me on as his personal chauffeur. A month ago, he had me fill in as top collector one week, gave me the job permanently the next. Are you suggesting I shouldn't be satisfied with whatever he's paying me?"

The girl's voice was taut. "Whatever it is, it's nothing compared to the thousands you're responsible for. Any week, you could be hijacked for those gambling receipts, maybe killed. Tonight you're even driving alone, probably with a small fortune."

"Duggan's sick. Howe wanted the money picked up on schedule."

Monica Farris made no immedi-

ate reply, staring through the windshield at the headlight beams funneling ahead. Finally, she said soberly, "Have you ever really looked at me?"

"Eh?"

"Really looked, I said. I'm not a young chick—I'm thirty-three. I've still got some looks and a good figure, but they won't last, and my voice is only average." She leaned closer, laid tense fingers on Lanier's knee. "Lou, I never knew my parents—I was raised in an orphanage. At sixteen, I was dancing in a burlesque chorus. A couple of years later I was singing in cheap night spots, touted by greedy agents with hot eyes and tolerated by grubby floor managers with four hands."

Her voice picked up an edge again. "I've wanted to make it big all my life. It's been an obsession, a hunger eating at me." She slumped back. "But I've never made it. Even moving into Howe's top spot, I'll still be second-rate . . ."

Lanier eyed the girl closer, then manufactured a tight smile. "Let me finish the script you've latched onto," he suggested. "You're disillusioned and bitter. And I'm dissatisfied, or should be. Together, we make a team of sorts. There's eighty-six thousand back there in the trunk. More than enough for a new start somewhere, some fancy living. So I don't turn in this week's

receipts to Sam Howe. We just keep on going tonight, the two of us, just keep going . . ."

Her hand stiffened on his knee. "We could do it, Lou," she said, the words almost a whisper. "We could. I don't know your taste in women, but I'd make it up to you, I swear I would!"

Lanier studied her again, then shook his head. "No dice," he said.

"Lou—"

"I'm sorry. The answer is no."

"But you're risking your life, every week—"

"I know what I'm doing."

Her voice shook. "Think, Lou, please! You'll never have another chance like tonight, without Duggan riding shotgun."

Lanier didn't answer her. Finally, lips quirking, the girl fell silent. For the remainder of the ninety-minute drive downstate they exchanged only impersonal monosyllables.

Arriving at their destination, Lanier let the girl out in front of the fancy nightclub in which Sam Howe maintained his headquarters. "I'll put the car away and bring in your suitcase, along with the receipts," he said.

Monica Farris' features were sober as she acquiesced briefly. She entered the premises without a backward look as Lanier tooled the car to the rear of the building.

Upstairs, in Howe's luxurious pri-

vate sanctum, the girl's taut expression quickly dissipated. She smiled as the stocky gambling tycoon waved her to a comfortable divan and offered her a drink.

Howe regarded her with approval. "I take it you're about to tell me what I want to hear."

Monica Farris nodded. "He wouldn't buy my pitch, Mr. Howe," she said. "Wouldn't even consider it."

Howe settled behind an ornate teakwood desk. "Good. I like him—he's been steady and reliable ever since I took him on. But when a man gets an unexpected chance for big money, fast, you never know. Slotting Lanier as top collector, I had to be sure. That's why I passed Duggan off as sick and worked you in."

"I think you can be sure, Mr. Howe," the girl said. "The story I made up pulled out all the stops, but he wouldn't go for it."

"Good girl," Howe said. "I won't forget you. Now, you'd better get out of here before he comes up."

Downstairs, about to drive into the club's parking area, Lou Lanier

hesitated. He found himself cranking the gist of what the girl had said through his mind again. He wasn't about to tie up with any thirty-three-year-old, frustrated canary, but, dammit, maybe he *hadn't* appreciated his true position the way she'd spelled it out—he *did* take risks. Was his own take worth the chances of his getting killed by some of Howe's competitors some night? Abruptly, he decided it wasn't. He had to thank the girl for pointing out that.

Of course, if he took off with no advance plans, and with Sam Howe certain to alert his entire organization into running him down, he'd be taking the gamble of his life. Yet he'd never have a better chance, what with Duggan's illness, and being alone now with the money. That eighty-six grand could take him far. Plenty far . . .

Upstairs, as Sam Howe continued to muse with satisfaction over the loyalty test he'd set up, Lou Lanier swerved his car from the nightclub's parking area and sped toward the freeway leading out of the city.



Into every dark corner there may shine light, if one can reach the switch.



A Novelette

*by
George C. Chesbro*

Slow day; anathema to a dwarf criminology professor moonlighting as a private detective. I had a graduate seminar to teach later in the afternoon but my lecture was prepared and I was in my downtown office, staring out my second-floor window, hoping for some business to blow in off the street. I had to settle for my brother.

Someone else was driving the unmarked car, but it was Garth—all normal six feet two inches of him—

who got out on the passenger's side, then walked stiffly across the sidewalk and into the building. I ran my finger over a water spot on the glass. It wasn't unusual for Garth to drop by for coffee when he was in the neighborhood, but this time

there had seemed a tension—an urgency—in the way he moved that was incongruous. I went out by the elevator to meet him.

The elevator doors sighed open—Garth's face was ashen, his eyes two open wounds. He pushed past a young couple, glanced once in my direction, then rushed into my office. I went after him, closing the door behind me. He had already stripped off his jacket, and the black leather straps of his shoulder holster stood out like paint stains on the starched white of his shirt. He took the gun from its holster and slid it across my desk. "Find a drawer for that, will you, Brother?" Garth's teeth were clenched tightly together and the voice behind them trembled.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Put it *away!*" Now Garth's voice boomed. His fists slammed down on the plastic surface of the desk top. A stack of books on the corner teetered and fell to the floor.

Angry men and guns make a bad mix. As a cop, Garth knew that better than anyone. I walked quickly around to the other side of the desk, opened a drawer and dropped the gun into it.

Garth sat down hard in a straight-backed wooden chair. He planted his feet flat on the floor and gripped the edges of the seat. Instantly the flesh around his knuckles

went white. His head was bent forward and I couldn't see his face, but the flesh of his neck was a fiery red, gorged with blood. I could see his pulse, framed by muscle cords that looked like steel rods implanted just below the skin.

I spoke very quietly. "You want to talk, Brother?"

Garth, in some soundproofed prison of rage, couldn't hear me. He suddenly sprang to his feet, grabbed the chair and flung it across the room, snapping a pole lamp in two and mining an ugly hole in the plaster wall. The shattered pieces fell to the floor; instant junk. In the same motion Garth spun around and with one sweep of his hand cleared the top of my desk. A heavy glass ash tray made another hole in the wall about a foot too low to be a perfect match for the other. Considering the fact that my office wasn't that large to begin with, I estimated that a complete renovation was going to take about three more minutes. I walked up to Garth and grabbed his arm. That was a mistake.

Now, I have a Black Belt, second Dan, in karate, and am reasonably proficient in a number of the other, lesser-known, martial arts; when you're a four-foot-seven-inch dwarf you develop a predilection for such things. Still, a man my size must rely on anticipation, leverage and angles, factors which don't nor-

mally spring to mind when you're merely trying to calm down your brother. Consequently, I found myself standing on my toes, Garth's hands wrapped around my neck. The whites of his eyes were marbled with red while the dilated pupils opened up and stared at nothing, like black circles painted on canvas by a bad artist.

I knew I had only a few seconds to act. At the least, I could very well end up with a cracked larynx; at worst, there was the very real possibility I was going to end up as one dead dwarf, killed by my own brother. I didn't like the options.

I was floating in an airless void, Garth's features spinning before my eyes. I extended my arms, then drove my thumbs into the small of his back, just above the kidneys. That didn't do much except make him blink. I smashed my stiffened fingers up into the nerve clusters in his armpits. The animal that Garth had become, grunted; his grip loosened, but it was nothing to cheer about; I still couldn't breathe. Finally I raised one hand up between his arms and poked at his larynx. Garth gasped and his hands came loose. I collapsed to my knees, my lungs sobbing for air. I managed to reach the shattered chair at the opposite end of the room. I grabbed one of the broken chair legs and spun around, prepared to bounce

the splintered wood off my brother's skull. It wasn't necessary. Garth was leaning against my desk, staring uncomprehendingly at his hands. His face had changed color like a traffic light, from a brilliant crimson to a sickly yellow-white. His gaze slowly shifted to where I was poised like a statue, my improvised club raised in the air.

"Mongo . . ." Garth's voice was a muffled whisper of pain.

"I hope you feel better," I said, trying to sound sardonic. It didn't come out that way. It was hard for me to sound sardonic with a bruised voice box that felt as if it had been pushed back somewhere in the vicinity of my spinal column.

Garth's lips moved, but no sound came out. He was across the room in four quick strides, trying to lift me up in his arms. Enough is enough—I pushed him away with the chair leg. I was building up a little anger of my own, but it vanished as the door suddenly opened. The man who stepped into the room was of medium height, with close-cropped, warm-yellow hair that tended to clash with his cold gray eyes. I wondered if he'd dyed his hair.

Garth glanced at the man, then quickly turned back to me. His face was a pleading exclamation mark as he shook his head. The movement was almost imperceptible, but I



thought I'd received the message.

"Who the hell are you?" I said to the man in the doorway. Oddly enough, my voice sounded quite normal, with just the right seasoning of surprise. It hurt only when I swallowed.

"Name's Boise," the man said, surveying the damage. "I came looking for my partner here. Saw your name on the directory down in the lobby. Didn't know Garth had a brother."

Or that the brother was a dwarf, judging from his expression. I knew that look from scores of experiences with potential but unsuspecting clients. I didn't like it. Boise wasn't exactly getting off on the right foot with me.

"Garth doesn't feel well," I said. "Why don't you tell MacGregor I've taken him home? I'll call in later and let him know how Garth is."

Boise didn't move. "What happened?"

"I'm redecorating."

"Must be expensive," Boise said without smiling.

"Look, Boise," Garth said tightly, turning to face the other man, "my brother's right. I can't cut it the rest of the day. Cover for me, okay? I'll be in tomorrow."

Boise glanced once more at the wreckage of the room, then shrugged and walked out into the

corridor. A few moments later I heard the whine of the elevator and Boise was gone.

"Where'd you pick him up?"

"We were assigned as a team for a case I've been working on," Garth said without looking at me. He had begun to tremble. "I don't know why. Look, get me out of here, will you?"

I went to the desk, took out Garth's gun and slipped it into my own pocket. Garth didn't object. He wheeled and walked out to the elevator ahead of me. I glanced at the clock as I closed the door. Less than ten minutes had passed from the time Garth had walked into my office. It struck me that Boise was a very impatient man.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I don't want you to think I'm being touchy," I said, guiding my compact out of the parking garage and into the cacophony of New York's midmorning vehicular insanity. "Still, the fact remains that you did try to kill me back there, and I don't even owe you money." I glanced sideways. Garth's face was stony, his eyes fixed straight ahead. "You knew enough to dump the gun," I said seriously. "That was smart, but a man doesn't do something like that just because he's feeling a little annoyed. I saw you get out of that car. You looked like

Lon Chaney, Junior running from a full moon. You climbed right out of your tree, and my guess is that it's not the first time something like this has happened. It's happened before, and you've done nothing about it. That's not so smart. It doesn't take a master detective like myself to figure out that you need a vacation—a long one—and some medical attention. I know a good shrink who teaches up at the—”

“Pull over a minute, will you?”

I debated with myself for a few moments, decided there was no sense in possibly provoking another attack, and pulled over to double-park beside a No Standing sign.

“You're right,” Garth said, still staring straight ahead of him. “It has happened before—four times in the past three weeks. Each time it gets worse. I can't think of any words to tell you how sorry I am about what happened back in your office, so I'm not even going to try. But I am telling you I can't go to a hospital or see a shrink. Not yet.”

“Like hell!”

Garth shook his head. Still, he remained calm. There was no sign of the terrible rage that had wracked him just a few short minutes before, but my neck still hurt. “Look,” Garth said quietly, “you yourself said I knew what was happening. I know I need rest, and I'm going to take it. You can take me to anyone

you want, and I'll cooperate fully, but just give me four days.”

“What happens in four days?”

“I have to testify before the grand jury—with Boise. I have to be there. It's very important.”

I grunted and slammed the car into gear. Garth reached out and touched my arm. I tensed, ready to drop him, but his touch was very gentle. “Just listen, Mongo.” I put the gears in neutral, but left the engine running. “Have you ever heard of Anethombolin?”

I'd seen the word somewhere but couldn't place it. I said so.

“Anethombolin is a hormone produced naturally in the body under certain conditions,” Garth continued. “Recently it was synthesized. Among other things, Anethombolin may provide a cure for asthma, male infertility, high blood pressure and a host of other ailments. It also induces spontaneous abortions, and that's what makes it potentially worth millions. I say ‘potentially’ because, so far, nobody has come up with a way to control certain very unpleasant side effects. A New York laboratory named Whalen Research Associates has spent a lot of money trying to find ways to neutralize those side effects, and they've developed a lot of patents along the way. With the liberalized abortion laws, you can see what a drug like this would

mean to some people here in this country, not to mention its value to the governments of underdeveloped, overpopulated nations like India. Because a lot of the work was government-financed, agreements were made that would provide for controlled, low-cost distribution. Those agreements go out the window if some *other* company comes up with the same thing, and that's exactly what may have happened.

"A few months ago an outfit calling itself Zwayle Labs announced that it was on the verge of developing synthetic Anethombolin fit for human consumption. Whalen claimed that Zwayle couldn't possibly have done the work without violating one or more of the patents Whalen holds; in other words, industrial espionage. A secret investigation was ordered, the results to be presented to a grand jury. I pulled the case, and Boise was assigned as my partner because he'd worked on similar cases before. We started the preliminary undercover work and discovered possible leaks on Whalen's staff. The nature of the business makes it all very tentative, but we did find *prima facie* evidence of industrial espionage and patent violation. What's needed now is a full-blown investigation, but first our evidence must be presented to the grand jury. If it isn't, a lot of time

will have been wasted, not to mention the fact that an injustice will have occurred."

That would have sounded naive—even funny—coming from a lot of cops I know; coming from Garth it didn't.

"Patent law. That sounds like a job for the feds."

"It is, but some aspects of the case come under our jurisdiction. Besides, we were asked to cooperate. We did the groundwork."

"Why can't Boise testify?"

"He can and will, but it's a very sticky deal, and the grand jury is going to want to hear corroborative testimony from either one of us. In other words, Boise needs me and I need Boise if we're going to make a case. Do you understand?"

"No. It sounds like a hell of a way to run an investigation."

"Industrial espionage and patent violations are very difficult things to prove—you'll just have to take my word for that. In any case, I must be at that hearing, and my testimony isn't going to mean much if they have to wheel me in from the psycho ward."

"I don't buy it, Garth. I *saw* you back there. You're not going to do anybody any good if you're dead—or if you're responsible for making somebody else dead."

"That's not going to happen, Brother." Garth's voice was harder

now, determined. "Four days. That's all I need. After that, a long rest. Agreed?"

Actually, there was nothing on which to agree. I couldn't make Garth enter the hospital and he knew it. He was asking for my co-operation; in effect, my approval, my belief that he could control the strange fires in him long enough for him to complete a task he had set for himself.

"Most of the work is done?" I asked.

"Right. Now it's mostly just a matter of waiting around for the hearing."

"Full checkup when it's finished?"

"Full checkup."

I didn't like it, but I made no move to stop him when he opened the car door and stepped out into the street.

"I'll need my gun, Mongo," Garth said quietly.

It was true. If Garth would have a tough time testifying from a psychiatrist's couch, he'd have an even tougher time explaining how and why his dwarf brother took his gun and wouldn't give it back. I took the gun out of my jacket pocket and gave it to him.

I hate hospitals. I'd spent too much time in them as a child while doctors struggled to cope with the

results of a recessive gene eight generations removed. The hospitals ran through my childhood like trains through a station. I stayed the same.

Now it was my brother, strapped to a bed in a psychiatric ward, too doped up even to recognize me.

I made arrangements to have him transferred to a private room and took a cab down to Garth's precinct station house. MacGregor, Chief of Detectives, was floundering around behind a desk strewn with stacks of coffee-stained papers. He was wearing his usual harried expression.

"What the hell is my brother doing up in Bellevue?"

"Easy, Mongo," MacGregor said. "I was the one who called you, remember? How is he?"

"Drugged right up to his eyeballs. I asked you what happened."

"I'm not sure. We're still trying to sort everything out. Garth called in sick yesterday. He came in this morning to go over some paper work with Boise. You knew he's been working on a big case?" I nodded. "Your brother and Boise were having coffee," MacGregor continued. "A few minutes later Garth comes out and gets into an argument with Lancey over some little thing. Anyway, your brother wouldn't let it go; he broke Lancey's jaw for him, then he tries to pistol-whip Q.J. Took four guys to

get him down. We called the hospital, and then I called you. We're just as anxious to know what happened as you are." MacGregor leaned forward confidentially. "He really wiggled out, Mongo. You had to be here really to appreciate what he was like. Boise says he's been acting funny for some time now."

"Is that right? What about the case Garth was working on? The grand jury is supposed to hear it day after tomorrow. What happens now?"

"Nothing. They won't be hearing anything from this department."

"Why can't the hearing be postponed until Garth is better?"

"Because it wouldn't make any difference. Boise says we don't have a case."

"Now why would Boise say a thing like that?"

"Ask him."

I did.

"You know about that?" Boise asked.

"Garth mentioned it to me."

Boise carefully stirred the coffee in front of him. The sound of the spoon bouncing off the sides of the cup grated on my nerves. "There was never a case to begin with," he said evenly. He punctuated the sentence by dropping the spoon on his saucer. "I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, but this whole affair was a result of paranoia on

your brother's part, and that's all."

"Uh-uh. He wasn't the one who asked to initiate the investigation."

"No. We were asked to investigate—we did, and found nothing. Everything Zwayle Labs had done was on the up-and-up. They just worked faster and cheaper than the Whalen people. Certainly we found nothing to present to a grand jury. Some circumstantial evidence, a little hearsay, most of which was sour grapes from staff members who hadn't been able to handle the competition within their own departments. Nothing concrete. The evidence just wasn't there."

"Garth said it was tricky, and you'd have to corroborate each other's testimony."

Boise had finished his coffee and was signaling for another. "What can I tell you? Somewhere along the way your brother took a real strong dislike toward the guy who runs Zwayle Labs, a man by the name of Hans Mueller. Don't know why, but that's the way it happened. Guess whatever it was that finally put him away was working on him even then. He swore he'd get Mueller, and he started inventing evidence in his mind to do it."

The second cup of coffee was served and Boise started clanking around in it with his spoon.

I suddenly felt sick to my stom-

ach. "Why didn't you tell MacGregor all this before?"

"Because I didn't want what happened to Lancey and Q.J. to happen to me. With me it could have been worse; I was alone with him all day. Besides, Garth's a brother officer. I wasn't about to tell him—or anybody else—that he was crazy. I was hoping he might straighten up after the grand jury shot us down."

"What's going to happen to him now?"

"They'll probably give him an extended leave of absence."

"It's more likely he'll lose his shield."

"Probably," Boise said, averting his eyes to his coffee. He didn't have to tell me that the camaraderie between police officers did not extend to asking taxpayers to keep a psycho cop on the payroll.

I didn't like it; all of the pieces seemed to fit, but the finished puzzle was ugly, misshapen.

"You mind if I look at the files?"

That stopped the stirring. "I think I would," Boise said after a pause, "and I think MacGregor will back me up. First of all, you're close to calling me a liar. Second, it's not the policy of the New York Police Department to let private citizens—especially private investigators—examine its files."

I bit off my next remark, rose and

turned to go. I was stopped at the door by one of those inspirations I usually know enough to keep to myself. I walked slowly back to the table wearing my innocent, concerned-brother face. It hurt like a mask of nails.

"Mueller. That's a kraut name, isn't it?"

Boise's eyebrows flicked upward. His eyes followed. "How's that?"

"Mueller," I said. "Isn't that a German name?"

"Yèah, I guess so. Why?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, really. I was just trying to figure why Garth would flip out like this. Now I think I know the reason."

"Which is?"

"Germans," I said easily. "Garth hates Germans. It's a real thing with him. He's been that way ever since he was a kid. Too many cheap comic books and war movies, I guess. Anyway, when he was fifteen he almost killed a German classmate. That cost him six months in an institution. I guess it would've been better if they'd kept him a little longer."

I knew I had heard of "Anethombolin, so I canceled my evening class and went to the university library to find out where. By closing time I'd found what I'd been looking for in the scientific journals. I photocopied the appro-

priate articles and stuck them into my pocket. Then I went to an all-night diner and ate a full meal. It was going to be a long night.

I was about to try my hand at reconstructing a sequence of events, a sequence that, for the moment, existed only in my mind: a play—a drama in which at least one of the participants would be an unwilling participant. To make matters more difficult, that player would also be the most critical of audiences. One act—or even one line—out of place and the curtain would come crashing down. If I were right—if there were more fact than fiction in the scenario I was about to produce—my brother's sanity could hinge on the success of my improvisation; his sanity, and possibly his life—if my basic premise were correct.

At the moment Garth was drowning in a black sea of madness and his flailing hurt people. Now he was no more than a dangerous animal. Of course it would not be the first time a good man had gone mad; a psychiatrist would have a field day expounding on the probable causes of Garth's breakdown. Still, I knew something the psychiatrists didn't; I knew my brother. If he were lost in a drowning pool of the mind, and all evidence suggested that he'd jumped in by himself, I still suspected he'd been pushed.

RAGE

It was dawn by the time I finished. I slept for an hour; rose and ate breakfast, then sat down at the telephone. I tried unsuccessfully to control the trembling of my hands as I dialed the number of Zwayle Labs, but I did better with my voice. It was Mueller who sounded tense as he agreed to meet me in an hour.

Act One appeared to have been well received.

Zwayle Labs stood in the middle of a lower West Side block like a chrome and glass box tied together with ribbons of plastic. I paused outside on the sidewalk, activated the miniature tape recorder and microphone in my jacket pocket, then went in. The recorder was compact, and sensitive enough to pick up a normal speaking voice thirty feet away. The only problem was that, even running at low speed, there was only about twenty minutes' worth of tape on the tiny reel. I was going to have to do my talking in a hurry.

Mueller did a double take on me in the hall. I brushed past him and walked into his office.

"Ten thousand dollars," I said as Mueller was in the process of nervously offering me a chair. "That's how much I'll take not to blow this whole deal wide open. Considering the stakes you're playing for, that's

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peanuts, but then I like peanuts.”

Mueller's pale, Teutonic features were suddenly mottled with patches of red, but I couldn't tell whether they were caused by anger or fear. Thin and professorial-looking, smelling of greed, Mueller wasn't exactly an imposing figure. Still, looks can be deceiving; at least, in my own case, I liked to think so. I was sitting in on the biggest poker game of my life, against a man I didn't know, and I was bluffing blind. I didn't know of any other way to do what I had to do. There just wasn't time.

“My time is valuable, Mr. Fredrickson,” Mueller said quickly, avoiding my gaze. “Please come to the point.”

“You knew my point when you heard what I had to say over the phone.” I watched him carefully, very conscious of the time limit imposed by the machine in my pocket, fighting the urge to rush my words. “I didn't know the whole story when I was talking to Boise yesterday. Then I went up to Garth's place and looked around. He'd made some notes on this case, private notes that he hadn't shown to anyone else for obvious reasons. Did you know that? Garth is a very conscientious policeman; he likes to have all the facts before he makes any accusations. That cost him this time.”

I punctuated my words by slapping down my manila folder in front of Mueller. He opened his mouth to speak. I spilled the photocopies out onto the polished mahogany surface of the desk and ran right through whatever it was he was going to say.

“Remember these? You should. They're reports on research done in this very lab—research done by you. Before this Anethombolin fuss you were well-known for your work in isolating and synthesizing drugs that were thought to trigger various emotional responses; all very experimental, but you'd had great success—with rats. The thinking was that the drugs might or might not affect men, but that a lot more research would have to be done. You decided to take a shortcut.”

“What are you getting at?”

His voice gave him away. The fact that he had agreed to see me at all had been the first indication that I was on the right track. The fact that he hadn't already thrown me out of his office was, to me, conclusive proof. I'd hooked him. Now the problem was to reel him in before the plastic line of the tape in my pocket broke; or before I made a mistake.

“My brother was your first human subject.” Which was precisely why my charade was so important; if I were right, I had to obtain sam-

ples of whatever it was Mueller had given Garth so that the lab boys could find some way to neutralize it.

Mueller seemed in perfect control. His eyes were like two opaque marbles. "What you are saying has no basis in fact, Mr. Frederickson," he said quietly. "Even if it did, I find it highly unbelievable that you would accept money to remain silent about something which could gravely affect your brother's health."

I laughed harshly. "That's because you're not a dwarf. In case you haven't noticed, my brother's bigger than I am. Bigger, and better able to take care of himself. It's always been that way, and it's going to have to stay that way. He's just going to have to take care of himself—that is, if you cough up the money. What's ten thousand dollars when you're anticipating millions from the exclusive rights to Anethombolin? In fact, I suggest that you hurry up and complete the deal before my conscience starts to bother me. Or before I up the ante. Maybe I'll ask for twice what you're paying Boise."

Thin, white lines were appearing around the corners of the other man's mouth. "Boise? Isn't that your brother's partner?"

"You know damn well who Boise is. He's the man you bought off.

He's the man who's been dumping your drugs into Garth—probably by way of his coffee. Garth's testimony was needed at that grand jury hearing. He couldn't be bribed; it wouldn't take much checking to find that out. Therefore, he had to be put out of commission, by a man who *could* be bribed: Boise. Then Boise could do his number about the whole thing being nothing more than paranoia on my brother's part and you'd be home free—with the Anethombolin process you stole from Whalen Research Associates. The testimony of a madman wouldn't hold up very well against that of a perfectly sane partner. It will still work, except that now it's going to cost you a little more money. You don't pay and I take my story to MacGregor, along with Garth's notes."

Then MacGregor would throw me out of *his* office. There were, of course, no notes and, thus far, the tape contained not much more than a not-too-brilliant Mongologue, though Mueller was sweating. I'd pulled the handle on this particular slot machine as far as it would go, and there wasn't much more I could do but stand and watch the cylinders spin. One lemon and it was all over.

Mueller tried to jiggle the machine. "You're forgetting one thing," he said breezily. "Your

brother has suffered bouts of paranoia before. Our own investigation shows that your brother was institutionalized for a homicidal attack on a German youth. I happen to be German and my associates and I have suspected all along that your brother's persecution of me had something to do with my national origin."

I turned away quickly so that Mueller couldn't see the flood of emotion spilling out of my eyes. The last number had come up and it spelled jackpot. I turned back and allowed myself a weak smile. "You lose, Mueller," I said easily. "I figured Boise would call you with that choice bit of information. The fact of the matter is that my brother has a special fondness for Germans. He should—both our parents are German."

The last resistance went out of him like air whooshing from a crushed lung. He stared at me helplessly. "All right, Frederickson. Perhaps you are due some money. Say, as a 'counseling fee.'"

"You can call it anything you want. Just get the money up front. Now."

"Perhaps we could negotiate the exact—"

"Shut up, Mueller!" Boise's voice came from behind me. I didn't bother to turn; I could feel the barrel eye of a .38 staring at my spine.

It looked as if the game weren't over yet. I had counted on Boise calling, but I hadn't counted on his actually being here for the meeting. I was out of cards, and someone had unplugged the slot machine.

"You're a fool, Mueller," Boise said calmly. Now the cold barrel was pressed against my temple as Boise's free hand flew expertly over my body until he found what he was looking for. He yanked the tape recorder out of my pocket, dropped it on the floor, then crushed it under his heel. "He doesn't want money. He's as straight as his brother. He just wanted you to talk, which you did beautifully."

Still keeping the gun trained on my head, Boise knelt and fired the scattered tape with his lighter. The room was suddenly filled with an acrid odor that made my eyes water.

"You're burning a hole in my carpet," Mueller said weakly, staring down at the small pyre of burning plastic.

"Get this, Mueller," Boise said, backing up so that both the scientist and myself fell into his range of fire, "I want that hundred thousand dollars you owe me, and I want to be free to spend it. If you don't start wising up, I'm going to burn a hole in your brain."

The tape was destroyed. Boise

snuffed out the last glowing embers with the toe of his shoe. I tried to think of some maneuver that would get me closer to Boise, but you don't mess with a man who practices three times a week on a firing range. The gun in Boise's hand was a tight drawstring on any bag of tricks that I might have been tempted to explore.

Boise wasn't taking any chances either. Slowly he came up behind me. I anticipated the blow and managed to move my head enough to avoid having my skull crushed. Still, it was a long way to the bottom of the rainbow-colored well

into which he crudely pushed me.

It was also a long way up.

The sides of the well were dotted with faces of my brother. His lips were curled back like an animal's, baring froth-specked teeth. There were large red holes where his eyes should have been. His hands were studded with hundreds of snakelike fingers, and I wept helplessly as they reached for me, curling around my throat, tearing at my eyes.

I floated up and out of the hole and down onto what felt like a hardwood floor. Finally conscious, my body was a raft cast adrift on a



vast, eerie sea of total darkness.

I was still crying, not as a man cries when touched by some deep emotion, but as a child cries in the grip of some nameless, nighttime terror. I sobbed and wailed, my hiccuping moans swallowed up by the dark. In one part of me I was profoundly embarrassed; in another part of me, weeping seemed the most natural thing in the world for me to be doing.

Gradually I muffled my cries and wiped my tears with the back of my hand. At the same time my muscles seemed to go rigid. I couldn't move or, rather, I *dared* not move. In the surrounding night I could hear the dry rustle of snakes, large snakes moving toward me; large snakes of the variety that lie in wait along the banks of tropical rivers to crush and eat things that are small and warm.

There were other things out there too, and they all crushed and squeezed and bit and hurt. I began to cry again, and pray to the God I had known as a child.

Another part of my mind, a tiny area where the fear had not yet penetrated, began to stir. I listened to it whisper of snakes and other things that crush, big things, a world of giants that laughed and mocked; things that would hurt a dwarf, things that would eat a dwarf.

It suddenly occurred to me that

these fears were somehow familiar, like a scarred rocking horse uncovered in a dusty corner of some attic, an attic of the mind. In this case they were old monsters from the mental storage bin of childhood.

Then I understood. I remembered Garth and Mueller and Boise, and I knew what they had done. The terrors *were* from childhood; all those special horrors that had plagued me when I had first learned I was small, so different from other children, had come back to visit. Something had dredged them all up from my subconscious and scattered them in the darkness around me . . .

Something like a drug; something like Phobetarsin; that was what the fear-producing drug had been called in the research papers I had read.

At least the drug Mueller had given *me* had a name.

The terrible dread was still there, but now I knew its source. That made all the difference in the world; I had *labeled* the fear—or at least its cause—and that made it, if no less real, at least easier to deal with it. I was sure I *had* been given a drug, probably Phobetarsin. The question remained as to why they had bothered. Perhaps it was an attempt to make me more manageable, or perhaps it was merely gratuitous sadism. Whatever the rea-

son; I knew I needed some defense.

I closed my eyes against the fear and slowly moved out across the room, crawling inch by inch on my belly. I finally bumped up against a wall and paused, cradling my head in my arms. My clothes were drenched with sweat and, once again, I was crying.

Still, I had my single psychological weapon; I *knew* what had unleashed the demons around me. Garth had had no such advantage. Whatever they had given him had somehow had the effect of stripping the scabs off his psyche, simultaneously releasing the thousand and one irritations and frustrations that plague a man every day, bringing them all up in one lump to fester in his conscious mind until a flash point was reached.

Somewhere in every man's mind are the fetid odors of rotted dreams, mercifully flushed into the sewers of the subconscious. Mueller had discovered chemicals that somehow interfered with the mechanism of suppression. He'd been playing games with my brother's sanity, not to mention my own. I owed him.

I curled my legs up close to my body and waited in the dark.

Several eternities later the lights came on, harsh and white-hot on the dilated pupils of my eyes. Now I could see the door, lined with rubber flaps to exclude any light, on

the other side of the bare room, to my right. It opened. Immediately I cringed, curling my body up into a tight ball. I covered my face with my hands, leaving just enough space between my fingers to see through.

Boise's gun was the first thing into the room, followed by Boise himself, then Mueller. Boise stopped inside the door, nudged Mueller and pointed at me. He was grinning.

"Boo!" Boise said. That was almost funny enough to make me forget the other, real fears that were still buzzing around inside my head.

I moaned and shrunk even closer to the wall. At the same time I dropped my right forearm and planted it in the angle between the wall and the floor. I would get only one shot at Boise and I wanted all the leverage I could get.

"Hey, dwarf!" Boise barked, still grinning. "You want to die, dwarf?" He was enjoying himself, and that was a mistake.

My sick terror was rapidly being displaced by red-cheeked, eminently healthy anger. I moaned a little bit, prompting Mueller to enter the conversation.

"Boise, I don't see why you have to needle him like that."

"You were the one who suggested doping him up."

"Just to make him easier to handle, Boise. I don't see how we can just—"

"I've already figured out what to do with him," Boise said, coming closer and looking for my eyes. His gun was still steady on me.

"Please let me go home," I said in my best whine, at the same time trying not to ham it up too much. "I promise I won't bother you anymore. Please don't hurt me." I considered my next words, then figured, what the hell. The *coup de grace*: "Please let me call my mother."

That broke Boise up—mentally. The room echoed with his loud, hoarse laughter. He reached out with the toe of his shoe to nudge me in the ribs, and that was what I had been waiting for. I broke him up again—physically.

Shifting all my weight on my right arm, I tensed and kicked out with my instep at the exposed side of his left knee. It popped with a metallic sound of breaking joints and tearing ligaments. Boise dropped like a felled tree, his gaping mouth wrapped around a long, meandering scream. The gun clattered to the floor and bounced in Mueller's direction. Mueller belatedly reached down for it and got me instead. I slapped him across the bridge of the nose. He sat down hard. I stood and placed the end of

the gun in his ear. I pulled the hammer back and Mueller made a retching sound.

"Get up, Mueller, don't throw up," I said evenly. "You do and I'll kill you. Think about that."

Mueller put his hand over his mouth and staggered to his feet. I glanced at Boise who lay on his side holding his shattered knée. His eyes had the dull sheen of cheap pottery. I turned back to Mueller.

"The drugs," I said. "I want samples of whatever it was you put into Garth and me."

Mueller's head bounced up and down like a wooden block on a string. He led me out of the room, down a narrow corridor, and into a smaller office. He reached up onto a shelf and took down two small vials.

"Which is which?"

"This is what we gave you," he said, pointing to the vial on the left. I took the other vial and dropped it into my pocket; I felt as if I were pocketing Garth's mind, his sanity.

There was something huge creeping up behind me. It was a green, multilegged insect that ate dwarfs. I resisted the impulse to turn and look for it. I knew there would be many such things waiting for me in the void of time ahead, at least until the contents of the other vial could be analyzed and a way found to neutralize its effects. Or perhaps the creatures would go

away by themselves. In any case, I decided I wanted company.

"Let's see how fast you can come up with two glasses of water." I waved the gun at him. He was very fast.

I opened the vial in my hand and tapped a few crystals of the drug into each glass, then motioned for Mueller to pick them up. He didn't have to be told what to do next. We marched back to the closed room and I waited while the cloudy water disappeared down the throats of the two men. Then I left them alone—I shut off the lights and closed the door.

I found a phone and dialed Garth's precinct. Then I backed up against the wall and held my gun out in front of me. The nameless forms sharing the room with me stayed hidden. At last MacGregor's

welcome voice came on the line.

"Listen to me closely," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady. "I can probably only get it straight once. Garth's insanity is a setup. I think he'll be all right if you do what I say. If you do a urinalysis and blood test soon enough, I think you'll still find traces of a very unusual drug in his system. I know you will in mine, and I can prove where it came from. In the meantime, send a car to pick me up. I'm at Zwayle Labs. I have a surprise package for you."

MacGregor started to pump me for more information. I was in no shape to give it to him, and I cut him off. Boise was starting to scream. Soon Mueller joined him in a muffled duet of terror.

"Please hurry," I said softly, closing my eyes. "I'm afraid."



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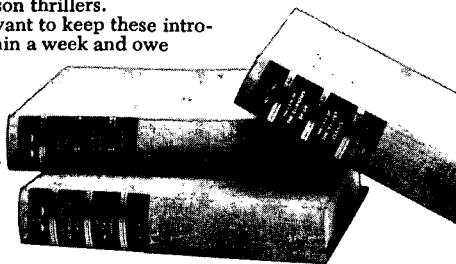
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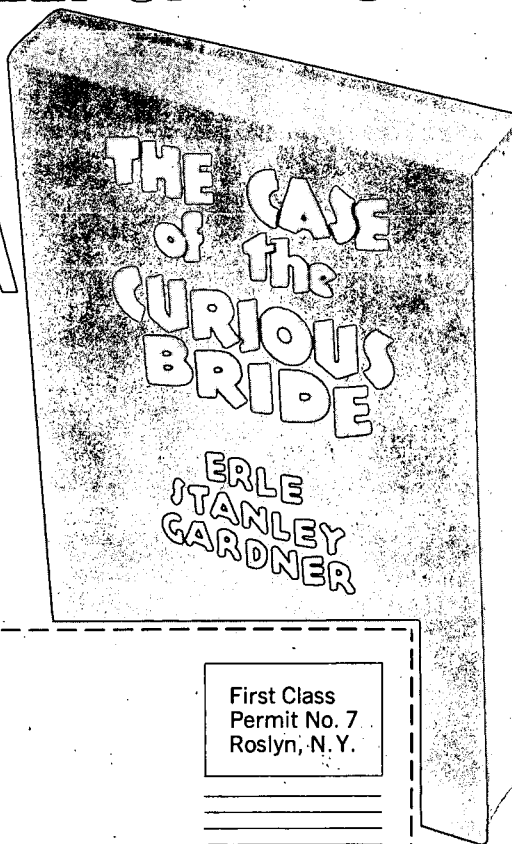
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